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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**“AMERICA, THE GREAT FRIEND”?
REANALYZING THAILAND-U.S. RELATIONS
IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

by

Jessica Sunkamaneevongse

December 2019

Thesis Advisor:
Co-Advisor:

Sandra R. Leavitt
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**“AMERICA, THE GREAT FRIEND”?
REANALYZING THAILAND-U.S. RELATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

Jessica Sunkamaneevongse
Captain, United States Air Force
BA, The Ohio State University, 2015

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(FAR EAST, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE PACIFIC)**

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ABSTRACT

Thailand and the United States have mutually benefited from 200 years of relations (since 1818) that strengthened during the Cold War and Vietnam War eras through their long-term alliance, security cooperation and economic engagement, and eventual U.S. assistance to Thailand's democratization. Though the United States was once tolerant of Thailand's frequent coups d'état, there is a common perception that relations were significantly damaged after the military-led coups in September 2006 and May 2014. U.S. criticism led Thai state leaders to rebuke U.S. interference in Thai politics and question whether the U.S. remains a true ally and friend. This thesis questions these assumptions by systemically assessing and analyzing military, economic, and diplomatic sectors of the relationship from 2001 to 2019. It examines the effects of the coups through systematic analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to understand how these coups and other events impacted the relationship. The main findings are that despite U.S. criticism and sanctions following the coups, the countries still maintained significant cooperation—particularly in the strategic and economic realms. But, since U.S. sanctions and criticism led Thai leaders to question U.S. commitments, Thailand hedged by deepening economic and strategic relations with China. Thailand's actions support theoretical arguments that Southeast Asian countries tend to hedge between great powers rather than balance or bandwagon.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

APEC	Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CFE-DM	Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CJTF	Combined Joint Task Force
DOD	Department of Defense
DSCA	Defense Security Cooperation Agency
EDA	Excess Defense Articles
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FMF	Foreign Military Financing
FMS	Foreign Military Sales
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
IMET	International Military and Education Training
Ji	Jemaah Islamiyah
JTSC	Joint Theater Security Cooperation
JUSMAG	Joint United States Military Advisory Group
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
OEC	The Observatory of Economic Complexity
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
RTA	Royal Thai Army
RTAF	Royal Thai Air Force
RTARF	Royal Thai Armed Forces
RTN	Royal Thai Navy
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
TIFA	Trade and Investment Framework Agreement
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
TRT	Thai Rak Thai
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
USA	U.S. Army

USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USBEA	U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis
USMC	U.S. Marine Corps
USN	U.S. Navy
USTDA	U.S. Trade and Development Agency
WTO	World Trade Organization

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. RESEARCH QUESTION

The Kingdom of Thailand is America's oldest treaty ally in Asia, and the two nations have had diplomatic relations for more than 200 years.¹ Thailand and the United States established relations in 1818 but did not formalize diplomatic relations until the signing of the 1833 Treaty of Amity and Commerce, officially making the Kingdom, then called Siam, the United States' first ally in Asia. Thailand-U.S. relations deepened in the 20th century when both were signatories to the 1954 Manila Pact that created the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which sought to prevent and fight against communism in Southeast Asia.² Despite the pact's dissolution in 1977, Thailand and the United States remain officially committed to one another through the signing of the 1962 Thanat-Rusk communiqué that outlined U.S. security commitments to Thailand against communist threats.³

Thailand-U.S. relations strengthened in the Cold War period during which American security and economic contributions to Thailand earned the United States the title, "America, the Great Friend," or "Amerika, maha-mit" (อเมริกาหมามิตร) in Thai.⁴ Yet, this epithet no longer conveys the same cordial and earnest connotation. Strains on Thailand-U.S. relations emerged in the early 1990s, starting in 1994 with Thailand denying a U.S. request to pre-position military equipment in Thai territorial waters and escalating

¹ "History of the U.S. and Thailand," U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, accessed February 17, 2019, <https://th.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/io/>.

² Kavi Chongkittavorn, "The Thailand-U.S. Defense Alliance in U.S.-Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Asian Pacific*, no. 137 (2019): 1–12, https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/ewc_api-n137_final.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=37062; "Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (Manila Pact); September 8, 1954," Yale Law School: The Avalon Project, accessed June 7, 2019, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/usmu003.asp.

³ Chongkittavorn, "The Thailand-U.S. Defense Alliance in U.S.-Indo-Pacific Strategy," 2.

⁴ Pongphisoot Busbarat, "Choosing Between 'Family' and 'Friend': A Preliminary Examination of Identities in Thai Foreign Policymaking toward China and the United States" (paper presented at ISA Conference, Hong Kong, June 2017). <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/82ce691b-e406-4286-958c-81a04806071b.pdf>.

with the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis that pummeled the Thai economy.⁵ Rather than coming to Thailand's aid, the United States remained largely absent, which led Thai nationals to soon ponder "why does a great friend treat us like this?"⁶

Thailand's disappointment with its seemingly ambivalent American ally became a reoccurring theme in the 21st century, especially after the United States imposed sanctions on the Kingdom following the September 19, 2006, coup d'état that ousted former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who had been elected in 2001 and re-elected in 2005. Interviews conducted by Australian National University with Thai youth, military officers, and officials reveal negative perceptions toward the United States for interfering in Thailand business and unjustly criticizing Thai politics.⁷ In essence, Thailand-U.S. relations no longer enjoy the "special relationship" they had during the Cold War, where the United States was undoubtedly Thailand's primary security and economic partner of choice.⁸

Yet, during incumbent Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's visit to the White House on October 2, 2017, President Donald Trump proclaimed, "we have a very strong relation [sic] right now ... and it's getting stronger in the last nine months."⁹ Prayut concurred, stating:

⁵ Kitti Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the U.S. Alliance System," in *Global Allies: Comparing U.S. Alliances in the 21st Century*, ed. Michael Wesley (Canberra, Australia: ANU Press, The Australian National University, 2017), 18.

⁶ Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the U.S. Alliance System," 118.

⁷ John Blaxland and Greg Raymond, *Tipping the Balance in Southeast Asia? Thailand, the United States and China*, vol. 37 (Australia: ANU Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, 2017), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/171102_Blaxland_TippingBalanceSoutheastAsia_Web.pdf?.IITpZJo0BPEYvMo7SWKIdQSBYVu.lyp.

⁸ Pongphisoot Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," *Asian Security* 13, no. 3 (2017): 256–274; Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "An Unaligned Alliance: Thailand-U.S. Relations in the Early 21st Century," *Asian Politics & Policy* 8, no. 1 (2016): 63–74.

⁹ "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha of Thailand Before Bilateral Meeting," White House, accessed May 24, 2019, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-prayut-chan-o-cha-thailand-bilateral-meeting/>.

I am confident that, with [the] President's leadership, we will be able to tackle all the problems and work together in order to further strengthen the cooperation between our two countries....¹⁰

The leaders' remarks evoked conflicting responses. Some analysts praised Trump for normalizing ties with Thailand after years of diplomatic stalemate, but cautioned against hope that the two states will actually execute their security and trade agreements as discussed during the meeting.¹¹ Others are optimistic that the meeting will prompt more opportunities for strategic and economic engagements between the two allies despite U.S. criticism of Thailand's domestic politics.¹² Given these incongruences, this thesis examines the evolution of Thailand-U.S. relations in the wake of the 2006 and 2014 coups and concludes that Thailand-U.S. relations have declined relative to the state of the alliance under the Thaksin Administration (2001–06) due to multiple, interrelated influences.

This conclusion was reached after a three-part analysis—covering military, economic, and diplomatic relations—over three time periods. First, it identified the state of Thailand-U.S. relations and contributing factors prior to the 2006 coup to establish a baseline understanding of the bilateral ties. Second, it analyzed developments in the same three sectors and influential factors explaining the reasons for the changes to Thailand-U.S. relations after the 2006 coup but before the 2014 coup. Third, it analyzed the same set of indicators as well as contributing factors to explain the reasons for the relationship's evolution after the 2014 coup. The data and analysis suggest that the most influential

¹⁰ It is customary in Southeast Asian literatures and scholarly works to refer to people by their first name instead of their surname. Hence, this thesis will follow suit and refer to all Thai actors by their first name. White House, "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha of Thailand Before Bilateral Meeting."

¹¹ One of Trump's talking points in meeting with Prayut is for Thailand to reduce its trade deficit with the United States. Trump and Prayut also called for "full respect for all legal and diplomatic processes" regarding the South China Sea crisis, which Thailand's position on the issue still remains "impartial and succinct." Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Reading Between the Lines of Prayut's U.S. Trip," *Bangkok Post*, October 10, 2017, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1339887/reading-between-the-lines-of-prayuts-us-trip>; Aukkarapon Niyomyat, "Thai Junta Leader Says Trump Sees Ties 'Closer than Ever,'" *Reuters*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-thailand/thai-junta-leader-says-trump-sees-ties-closer-than-ever-idUSKBN17Y0TS>; Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 270.

¹² Prashanth Parameswaran, "Strengthening the US-Thailand Alliance for an Indo-Pacific Future," *Diplomat*, December 7, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/strengthening-the-us-thailand-alliance-for-an-indo-pacific-future/>.

factors were Thailand's prospective bandwagoning role in the current era of great power competition, the ramifications of the 2006 and 2014 coups in Thailand, the impact of Thai foreign policies and Thai political actors who adopted them, and the influence of U.S. sanctions and administrations.

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

On June 1, 2008, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates visited Thai Prime Minister and Defense Minister Samak Sundaravej, prompting the visit to be hailed as a reaffirmation that “the military-to-military relationship between the U.S. and Thailand is based on shared democratic principles.”¹³ Secretary Gates was praising Thailand's quick return to democratic principles and civilian control following the 2006 coup. In the decade following Secretary Gates' remarks, Thailand witnessed yet another coup in 2014, making it the nineteenth successful coup in a long line of coup and coup attempts since the 1932 revolution that ended absolute monarchy in Thailand.¹⁴

Unlike the 2006 coup, the May 22, 2014, coup that overthrew Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's elected government brought stricter and longer-term consolidation of power by Prayut, who, at the time, was the Chief General of the Royal Thai Army (RTA). Since leading the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) during the coup, Prayut eventually returned Thailand to a “Thai-style democracy” governed by a royal-military alliance with a heavily conservative political agenda.¹⁵ Five years later, Thailand finally held an election on March 24, 2019, and after three more months of debates and vote recounts, Thailand saw Prayut retain his premiership for an additional term.¹⁶

¹³ Donna Miles, “Gates Affirms Democratic Principles During Bangkok Visit,” *American Forces Press Service*, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=50064>.

¹⁴ Nicholas Farrelly, “Why Democracy Struggles: Thailand's Elite Coup Culture,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67, no. 3 (2013): 281–296.

¹⁵ Prajak Kongkirati, “Haunted Past, Uncertain Future: The Fragile Transition to Military-Guided Semi-Authoritarianism in Thailand,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2018): 363–376.

¹⁶ Muktitu Suhartono and Austin Ramzy, “Thailand Election Results Signal Military's Continued Grip on Power,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/09/world/asia/thailand-election-results.html>; Tan Hui Yee, “Thai PM Prayut Chan-o-cha Gets New Term,” *Straits Times*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/thai-parliament-in-marathon-debate-before-voting-for-the-next-prime-minister>.

Examining, again, Secretary Gates' comments, and the foundation underscoring the Thailand-U.S. relationship, and how it has evolved in the 21st century, the state of Thailand-U.S. relations since the 2006 coup needs revisiting.

The pillar of Thailand-U.S. relations resides in their security cooperation. Indeed, it was during the Cold War that Thailand aligned with the United States and permitted the latter to base its troops off of Thai soil to fight communist insurgencies in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam.¹⁷ Thailand was also the first Asian nation to send troops to fight in the Korean War under the United Nations flag, which saw Thai military forces fighting alongside American forces.¹⁸ During the Vietnam War, Thailand allowed U.S. covert operations to be staged in its country with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—then, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—training Thai forces in counter-guerrilla warfare.¹⁹ Their unequivocal security alliance continued into the 1990s after the fall of the Communist Block.

This united and strong alliance was also not confined to the 1990s. Despite Thai elites' mistrust of the United States following the Asian Financial Crisis, Thailand-U.S. security cooperation continued without major friction.²⁰ This was largely due to Thaksin's foreign policy of aligning with President George W. Bush's administration in the U.S.-led global war on terrorism campaign.²¹ Still, Thaksin did not make this decision lightly or immediately. Thaksin struggled between appeasing a historically key ally's requests for Thailand's willing support and the risk of backlash from Thai-Muslim voters who

¹⁷ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 258-259.

¹⁸ Karl D. Jackson and Wiwat Mungkandi, *United States-Thailand Relations* (CA: UC Berkeley, 1986).

¹⁹ Arne Kislenko, "A Not So Silent Partner: Thailand's Role in Covert Operations, Counter-Insurgency, and the Wars in Indochina," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 24, no. 1 (2004), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/292/465>.

²⁰ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 264.

²¹ Paul Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 26, no. 3 (2004): 460–79, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798704>.

constituted a substantial body of his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) political party and opposed U.S. military campaigns against Muslim countries.²²

Thaksin, in support of U.S. Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan, ultimately authorized U.S. ships to visit Thai ports and granted the United States over-flight rights and refueling aircraft capabilities at U-tapao airbase in early October 2001.²³ In late May and early June 2003, after Thaksin admitted that the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist group was operating in Thailand, Thai police arrested Thai nationals accused of planning embassy bombings and illegally selling highly radioactive isotopes.²⁴ Eventually, Thailand joined the United States' "coalition of the willing in Iraq" by deploying 443 Thai troops to Iraq for a year, starting in September 2003, to assist in the country's rebuilding efforts.²⁵ As a result of Thailand's support in the war on terrorism, President Bush officially designated Thailand as a Major Non-NATO Ally at the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Bangkok on October 2003. Thus, similar to Thailand's actions during the 20th century, the Kingdom's alignment with the United States in the war on terrorism at the onset of the 21st century left little doubt as to Thailand's security allegiance.

Presently, Thailand-U.S. relations are important for more than being the oldest treaty alliance in the Indo-Pacific or Thailand being designated a Major Non-NATO Ally. It is important because of Thailand's relationship vis-à-vis the United States and a rising China in this new era of great power competition.²⁶ To counter China's rise, the United States must devote resources to maintaining and even building the relationship with its oldest friend in Asia. The United States must also not forget or neglect the history between Thailand and China, lest America risk losing a formidable ally to the region's dragon. To Thailand, China still remains the unexpected ally that came to the Kingdom's aid in

²² Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 466.

²³ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 466.

²⁴ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 467.

²⁵ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 467.

²⁶ Ann Marie Murphy, "Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning: Thailand's Response to China's Rise," *Asian Security* 6, no. 1 (January 2010): 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/147998509034719222>.

February and March of 1979 by sending troops to fight against the Vietnamese invasion on Thai borders during the latter's attempt to take Cambodia.²⁷ Moreover, China, not the United States, was one of the key countries that assisted Thailand during the Asian Financial Crisis by providing an additional \$1 billion rescue package.²⁸ Thus, China's actions have earned it the title of a "reliable economic friend" and "an exemplar for what a true friend would do."²⁹ Thai-Sino relations—strategically, economically, and diplomatically—then, too, have grown considerably.³⁰

Still, Thailand regards its American ally as a "critical economic partner and its security partner of choice,"³¹ notwithstanding the Kingdom's perception of China and Thailand's current lack of shared democratic principles with the United States. Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick M. Shanahan stressed the alliance's and Thailand's strategic importance in the 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report:

These alliances are indispensable to peace and security in the [Indo-Pacific] region and our investments in them will continue to pay dividends for the United States and the world, far into the future.... As a U.S. ally that is both central to ASEAN and positioned between South Asia and Southeast Asia, Thailand plays a key geostrategic role in the Indo-Pacific region.³²

²⁷ Sakkarin Niyomsilpa, "Thailand's Security Relationship with China: Implications and Prospects" (master's thesis, Australian National University, 1989), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/156712469.pdf>.

²⁸ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 262.

²⁹ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 262; Kevin Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 1 (2018): 116–130.

³⁰ Ian Storey, *Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength*, ISEAS Report No. 43 (Singapore: Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2019_43.pdf; Ian Storey, "From Strength to Strength: Military Exercises Bolster Sino-Thai Relations," *China Brief Volume* 12, no. 12 (2012), <https://jamestown.org/program/from-strength-to-strength-military-exercises-bolster-sino-thai-relations/>; FOIA Electronic Reading Room: China, *Sino-Thai Military Relations* (Washington, DC: Defense Intelligence Agency), <https://www.dia.mil/FOIA/FOIA-Electronic-Reading-Room/FOIA-Reading-Room-China/FileId/39756/>.

³¹ Brian Harding, "Moving the U.S.-Thailand Alliance Forward," Center for Strategic and International Studies, last modified August 7, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/moving-us-thailand-alliance-forward>.

³² Patrick M. Shanahan, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019), https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/31/2002139210/-1/-1/1/DOD_INDOPACIFIC_STRATEGY_REPORT_JUNE_2019.PDF.

The co-sponsored Thailand-U.S. COBRA GOLD military exercise, moreover, remains, for example, the largest multilateral military exercise in the Indo-Pacific that includes annual U.S. participation.³³ Thailand also provided the U.S. military access to the geostrategic U-tapao airbase for multinational humanitarian efforts and the global war on terrorism in the 2000s.³⁴ It stands to reason that Thailand-U.S. relations are built upon a historical legacy that, should they decline, may prove damaging to U.S. strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Most importantly, understanding how strong the relationship has been and examining the factors that might have weakened Thailand-U.S. relations provides much-needed knowledge about its likely future trajectory. Analyzing how the relationship has changed will also provide suggestions for how to strengthen it and avoid conflict.

Finally, it is crucial to study the evolution of Thailand-U.S. relations because Thailand “stands out as being comfortable with China’s rise and its intentions,” unlike its regional neighbors in Southeast Asia—for example, Singapore and Vietnam—that actively seek a U.S. presence to counter rising Chinese influences.³⁵ Yet, Thailand’s acceptance of China is perplexing considering that Thailand is a U.S. treaty ally, and the Kingdom’s behavior is not consistent with Kenneth M. Waltz’s balance of power or Stephen M. Walt’s balance of threat theories. Examining Thailand’s actions can advance the study of these two fundamental international relations’ realist theories. Understanding Thailand’s foreign policies and actions toward the United States in the context of the Kingdom’s foreign policies toward China will contribute to the discourse concerning small states’ roles in an anarchical world.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review analyzes existing scholarly arguments that might account for how Thailand-U.S. relations have evolved in the 21st century. It is structured into three

³³ Emma Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. IF10253 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2018), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10253.pdf>.

³⁴ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*.

³⁵ Harding, “Moving the U.S.-Thailand Alliance Forward.”

sections, each focused on a specific explanation for that evolution: bandwagoning theory, U.S. foreign policy and Thai domestic politics, and hedging theory. It highlights the possible contributing factors that may account for changes to or continuity in Thailand-U.S. relations and explain their evolution since the 2006 coup. First, Randall L. Schweller's bandwagoning theory is considered in relation to Waltz's and Walt's theories of bandwagoning.³⁶ Second, U.S. foreign policy and events in Thai domestic politics are discussed. Third, Thailand's ambiguous hedging policy is assessed per the application of Van Jackson's and Ann Murphy's hedging theories toward the United States and China that may challenge the Thailand-U.S. alliance. Finally, the literature review concludes by identifying the prevalent factors that connect the three literatures to form potential explanations for the evolution of Thailand-U.S. relations since the 2006 coup.

1. Bandwagoning with Revisionist States

Randall Schweller's bandwagoning theory submits that states bandwagon with revisionist actors (states) for profit.³⁷ Schweller's bandwagoning, unlike other scholars' depiction, is a voluntary state action chosen during times of change based on three factors: terminology, relation to the status-quo bias, and interplay with revisionist states. First, bandwagoning must be understood at its rudimentary level and not as a concept in opposition to "balancing" theory. Schweller explains:

The phrase "to climb aboard the bandwagon" implies following a current or fashionable trend or joining the side that appears likely to win. Bandwagoning may be freely chosen, or it can be the result of resignation to an inexorable force.³⁸

Therefore, states not do solely or mostly bandwagon in response to a threat, since that is not the most accurate usage of the term nor always the case. States may simply bandwagon with a powerful actor (state) in order to share in the victors' profits.

³⁶ Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72–107, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539149>; Kenneth M. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

³⁷ Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," 106.

³⁸ Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," 81.

Second, Schweller warns against upholding the status-quo bias for balancing, which will appear more dominant than bandwagoning if that bias is maintained. He criticizes neorealists such as Waltz and Walt for their bias in viewing the world through the perspective of a satisfied, status-quo state. This balancing bias, as described by Schweller, assumes that states will sacrifice little to improve their position in an anarchical world order but willingly take great risks to protect their values and assets. Additionally, he argues this bias is predicated on the false belief that all states' first concern is security, which, again, he believes is only the case for status-quo states content with their great power position in an anarchical world. Sustaining this balancing bias would woefully neglect revisionist states that seek to not just preserve, but also improve, their position in the anarchical international structure.

Revisionist states provide important context for why other states might choose to bandwagon with them. In Schweller's argument, it is with revisionist states that other countries bandwagon most often. He posits that revisionist states, unlike status-quo states, do not predominantly care about their security, since they must risk security to achieve goals by making gains relative to others, which may lead to power struggles. Considering that bandwagoning tends to occur most often when the status-quo order starts to come apart, other states that seek to share in conquered spoils or escape the victors' wrath may bandwagon with revisionist states.³⁹ Hence, Schweller asserts that "bandwagoning is commonly done in the expectation of making gains; balancing is done for security and it always entails costs."⁴⁰ Simply put, states that bandwagon with revisionist states against the status-quo power perceive their alliances as a "positive-sum game" and anticipate the profits of aligning with the winning side.⁴¹ Some foreign policy autonomy, moreover, is sacrificed in military alliances and, so, argues Schweller, the imbalances of threat or power are not determinant factors of alignment decisions; those factors are the compatibilities of political goals between states. Thus, he concludes that dissatisfied powers, driven by profit

³⁹ Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," 81.

⁴⁰ Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," 106.

⁴¹ Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," 107.

over security, will bandwagon with an ascending revisionist state; satisfied powers, despite being on the stronger side, will join the status-quo force.

In this contemporary era of great power competition between the United States and a rising China, Thailand's position vis-à-vis the two countries is being tested. To the west and an ocean away sits an ally with a shared history of strategic cooperation and trade; to the north sits another partner with a similar, albeit not as deep or formal, history of strategic cooperation and trade. Thus, if Thailand-U.S. relations have declined, bandwagoning is a possible explanation for why Thailand has begun to side more frequently with China.

2. U.S. Foreign Policy and Thai Domestic Politics

Various scholars and journalists have insisted for different reasons that Thai U.S. relations are in decline. Two main camps emerge from this debate: those who claim the decline is a result of U.S. foreign policy toward Thailand and those who cite Thai domestic politics as the driving force. However, one of the first questions that must be answered is whether there has truly been a significant decline in activities, or whether the alleged changes are more rhetorical than reality. This thesis takes on this task.

Some scholars who name U.S. foreign policy as the primary source for the possible decline in Thailand-U.S. relations blame U.S. political leaders' actions and U.S. sanctions. For instance, Thai political scientist Chookiat asserts that President Trump's "election victory in 2016 has thrown [former] President [Barack H.] Obama's 'pivot' towards Asia into jeopardy, with an uncertain impact on U.S.-Thai relations."⁴² While tangible results following President Trump and Prayut's meeting in 2017 on strategic cooperation and trade continue to evolve, Acting Secretary Shanahan's report suggests some progress among state officials with regard to strengthening Thailand-U.S. relations.⁴³

Other scholars contend that one the primary reasons for a perceived decline in Thailand-U.S. relations is U.S. statements about and treatment of Thailand following the

⁴² Chookiat Panasornprasit, "Thailand: The Historical and Indefinite Transitions," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2017), 362, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/658029/pdf>.

⁴³ Shanahan, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report 2019*.

2006 and 2014 coups, specifically, public scolding and imposed sanctions.⁴⁴ For instance, in response to the 2006 coup, former U.S. State Department Deputy Spokesman Tom Casey announced:

There's no justification for a military coup in Thailand or in anyplace else.... We certainly are extremely disappointed by this action. It's a step backward for democracy in Thailand. There are also consequences when these kinds of actions take place...and obviously, in light of what's happened, in light of this coup, there are aspects of our relationship that we're going to have to review.⁴⁵

Yet, we must step back. The 2006 coup, in practice, may not have critically impacted Thailand-U.S. relations as claimed, given that events such as the 2007 COBRA GOLD exercise, as one example, proceeded as scheduled, and it might stand to reason the same after the 2014 coup.⁴⁶ In 2014, the United States outright criticized the military junta and downgraded its engagement by suspending military arms sales and assistance to Thailand.⁴⁷ These reactions, one rhetorical and the other substantive, fed into Thais' mistrust of the United States as not only prying into Thailand politics, but also unreasonably hurting Thailand-U.S. military relations.⁴⁸ U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's criticism exacerbated Thailand's poor view of the United States when he declared that "there is no justification for this coup... This act will have negative implications for the Thailand-U.S. relationship, [and] especially our relationship with the Thai military."⁴⁹

But even then, in early 2018, *Stars and Stripes* published a headline announcing that "Thai-U.S. military relations flourish even as ruling junta postpones elections."⁵⁰ The article reported that despite Thailand inviting the Myanmar military, whose government is

⁴⁴ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 269.

⁴⁵ "United States: Thai Coup 'Unjustified,'" *Bangkok Post*, https://web.archive.org/web/20071028222056/http://bangkokpost.net/breaking_news/breakingnews.php?id=113057.

⁴⁶ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 259.

⁴⁷ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 267.

⁴⁸ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 268-69.

⁴⁹ Pongsudhirak, "An Unaligned Alliance: Thailand-U.S. Relations in the Early 21st Century," 71.

⁵⁰ Wyatt Olson, "Thai-U.S. Military Relations Flourish Even as Ruling Junta Postpones Elections," *Star and Stripes*, <https://www.stripes.com/news/thai-us-military-relations-flourish-even-as-ruling-junta-postpones-elections-1.528322>.

accused by the United Nations of ethnically cleansing Rohingya Muslims, to COBRA GOLD 2018, the United States, nonetheless, sent approximately 6,800 personnel to attend the exercise. It also reported that this number nearly doubled the number of U.S. troops who had participated in COBRA GOLD 2017. In this case, U.S. foreign policy had only minimally affected Thailand-U.S. military relations.

Secondly, another possible factor that shapes Thailand-U.S. relations is that of Thai domestic politics—namely, Thai prime ministers’ decision-making processes and foreign policies. Consider again Thaksin’s foreign policy toward the United States during the early 2000s: despite concerns of upsetting the Thai-Muslim lobby in his TRT political party, Thaksin still supported the U.S.-led war on terrorism campaign, even military action in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵¹ Thaksin’s actions are significant, since, early in his term, he prioritized relations with China, the European Union, India, and Japan over the United States, leading several scholars to describe him as the 21st century’s Mahathir bin Mohamad of Malaysia or Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, two semi-authoritarian leaders known for their independent thinking.⁵²

How Prayut prioritizes the Thailand-U.S. relationship is equally impactful, although history evinces concerns. Prayut was unabashed in criticizing the United States’ condemnation of the 2014 coup.⁵³ In asserting that martial law and military coups restore political stability and help protect Thai democracy, he rebutted U.S. censure and maintained that there is no one single type of democracy, that Thailand must follow its own path.⁵⁴ Prayut also cultivated more secure Sino-Thai relations by signing two memorandums of understanding, one regarding a key rail project and the other regarding purchasing agricultural products.⁵⁵ In 2015, Thailand, under Prayut’s rule, went so far as

⁵¹ Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?” 467-69.

⁵² Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?” 476; Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of a Thailand* (Copenhagen, Denmark: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2005).

⁵³ Busbarat, “Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship,” 268.

⁵⁴ Busbarat, “Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship,” 268.

⁵⁵ Hewison, “Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed,” 121-22.

to order 28 military VT-4 tanks from China and 10 additional tanks in 2017.⁵⁶ The *Nikkei Asian Review* further reports that in 2017, Thailand ordered a Yuan Class S26T submarine at 13.5 billion baht (\$400 million) and forecasted two additional purchases projected at a total procurement cost of 36 billion baht (\$1.1 billion).

Arguably, under Prayut's rule, and as this thesis later demonstrates, Sino-Thai relations have strengthened while Thailand-U.S. relations have declined in some areas but not as significantly and widely as some have claimed. Importantly, there is little evidence that Thailand cultivated Sino-Thai relations to diminish Thailand-U.S. relations. Rather, Prayut since his 2014 coup appears to have courted closer ties with Beijing because the United States had suspended much-needed foreign assistance. Moreover, bringing economic growth to Thailand helped shore up the Prayut regime's legitimacy.

3. Hedging as a Form of Ambiguous Thai Foreign Policies

Finally, it would be negligent to conduct a study on any Southeast Asian country without addressing hedging, the theory commonly used to assess Southeast Asian states' foreign policies. This thesis draws upon Van Jackson's hedging theory as a state's mechanism for coping with uncertainty by employing a strategy that permits it to mitigate alignment-associated risks by pursuing contradicting or opposing actions.⁵⁷ He argues that in Southeast Asia hedging has taken two predominant forms. The first is to increase military investments from and engagement with China and other states in the region along with deeper security cooperation in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The second is to increase diplomatic and economic engagement within ASEAN countries and China, while pursuing "increased military cooperation with the United States."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Marwaan MaCan-Markar, "Thailand Mends U.S. Military Ties after Post-Coup Tilt to China," *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 30, 2018, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Thailand-mends-US-military-ties-after-post-coup-tilt-to-China>.

⁵⁷ Van Jackson, "Power, Trust, and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14, no. 3 (2014): 331–356, <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/lcu005>.

⁵⁸ Jackson, "Power, Trust, and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security," 334.

Jackson's hedging theory is predicated on the complementary relationship between power transition theory, mistrust under multipolarity, and complex networks.⁵⁹ As Jackson explains, power transition theory maintains that the uncertainty of a power transition between the United States and China gives rise to hedging and that multipolarity explains a state's uncertainty about the intentions of various other states. He contends that complex networks—and their structure of sensitivity, fluidity, and heterarchy—play a significant role in understanding the make-up of Asian states and why they are inclined to hedge as opposed to balance or bandwagon.⁶⁰ These complex networks represent relationships among actors and define structure in foreign affairs based off said relationships. Simply put, states are sensitive to how other states' actions may affect them, and, given how fluid alignment structures are (today's ally could be tomorrow's enemy), states are less inclined to align with one great power over another to avoid being dominated by that power and lose state autonomy.

This thesis also considers Ann Murphy's interpretation of balancing and bandwagoning.⁶¹ She argues that Thailand will be balancing against a rising China if Thailand starts to restructure its armed forces, acquiesces to U.S. demands, and increases its procurement of American weapons. Conversely, Thailand will be bandwagoning with China if Thailand begins to tolerate China's illegitimate actions while still viewing it as a threat. Finally, Thailand will be hedging with the United States and China if Thailand's balancing behavior is present while it continues engaging with China. What is notable about Murphy's assertions is that she bases her definition of bandwagoning on Walt's bandwagoning theory, which claims states bandwagon in responses to threats.⁶² She posits that Thailand does not view China as a threat. But this viewpoint undermines her point,

⁵⁹ Jackson, "Power, Trust, and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security," 331-33.

⁶⁰ According to Jackson, sensitivity entails the extent to which one state's actions affect another, fluidity accounts for the changing structure in foreign affairs, and heterarchy denotes the existence of multiple hierarchies.

⁶¹ Murphy, "Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning: Thailand's Response to China's Rise," 1-27.

⁶² Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

since, as Schweller rightly articulates, determining whether states will bandwagon based on Walt's threat factor will narrow the reasons why states might choose to bandwagon.

Ultimately, Jackson's and Murphy's hedging theories are best understood as explanations for ambiguous foreign policy decisions, given that it is in the interest of every state to adopt policies that will best serve its interests. This foreign policy is best understood as follows:

A vision of a desired outcome or set of interests in interacting with another state/actor, the strategies and ideas used in achieving these goals, and the available resources at a state's disposal, in guiding her interaction with other states.⁶³

It should, therefore, be recognized that the extent to which Thailand courts a relationship with China is a mere matter of ambiguous Thai foreign policies. After all, scholars disagree as to whether an improvement in Sino-Thai relations is due to China filling the U.S. void in strategic, economic, and diplomatic engagement since the 2006 coup, thereby becoming "Thailand's preferred major power partner," or, rather, the Sino-Thai relation is simply building upon a preexisting partnership.⁶⁴

Thai-Sino relations, while made stronger in part because of U.S. sanctions and criticism, displayed signs of strengthening prior to the 2006 and 2014 coups.⁶⁵ Hewison makes a cultural argument by attributing recent strengthening to the deep history of Sino-Thai relations, as well as Thailand's ability to successfully integrate ethnic Chinese into the Thai community and ethnic Chinese heritage now being celebrated openly among Thai elites. If Hewison is correct, Thailand sought to foster a stronger Sino-Thai relationship as part of their interwoven history while also maintaining or pursuing a greater Thailand-U.S. relationship. Yet, given Sino-Thai hostility during the Cold War, it seems realism and

⁶³ Bojang As, "The Study of Foreign Policy in International Relations," *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (2018), 17: 10.4172/2332-0761.1000337.

⁶⁴ Ian Storey, *Thailand's Post-Coup Relationships with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington*, Report No. 20 (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2015), https://www.academia.edu/19446752/Thailands_Post-Coup_Relations_with_China_and_America_More_Beijing_Less_Washington; Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," 128.

⁶⁵ Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," 128.

political ideology are more influential than culturalism. Regardless, Thailand's ambiguous foreign policy could be, in itself, another explanation for how Thailand-U.S. relations have evolved since the 2006 coup if this ambiguity contributed to increased acrimony in the Thailand-U.S. relationship.

4. Conclusion

Three consistent explanations are extrapolated from these literatures: Thailand's role vis-à-vis the United States and China in their great power competition, the impacts of the 2006 and 2014 coups on U.S. foreign policy and Thai domestic politics, and Thailand's ambiguous foreign policies toward the United States and China. As this thesis later shows, Thailand's role in the great power competition—an unraveling of the status-quo—does not appear to be the result of bandwagoning with China out of a desire to share in the victor's profits, since Thailand did not outright align with China over the United States. Instead, the 2006 and 2014 coups, together with Section 7008 of the H.R.2855, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, compelled the United States to cut foreign aid to Thailand, because it “prohibits the use of funds... for assistance to any country whose elected head of government is deposed by military or military-supported coup or decree.”⁶⁶ Coupled with U.S. political leaders' criticisms of the coup and Thailand's domestic politics engendering its leader's rebuttal of U.S. censure, some aspects of Thailand-U.S. relations have been negatively affected.⁶⁷ Finally, various Thai prime ministers who came into power since the 2006 coup aggravated Thailand-U.S. relations by adopting ambiguous—or in some instances, arguably none at all—foreign policies.

⁶⁶ *Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act before the House Committee on Appropriations*, H.R. 2855, 113th Cong. (2014), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/2855?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22%5C%22military+coup%5C%22%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=28>.

⁶⁷ Jessica Schulberg, “The Military Coup in Thailand Is Putting the U.S. in an Awkward Position,” *New Republic*, May 23, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/117894/thailand-coup-foreign-assistance-act-put-us-awkward-position>.

D. EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Drawing from the literature review, this thesis posited three potential factors that may have influenced the evolution of Thailand-U.S. relations since the 2006 coup: Thailand's prospective bandwagoning role in this great power competition, the ramifications of the 2006 and 2014 coups in Thailand, and Thai foreign policies and the Thai political actors who adopt them. These factors led to three hypotheses: bandwagoning, U.S. foreign policies and Thai domestic politics, and ambiguous Thai foreign policies.

The first hypothesis, which did not hold up, was that Thailand is bandwagoning with a rising China in the hope of sharing conquered spoils. It was based on a consideration of China as a revisionist state and Thailand's desire to advance its strategic capabilities and grow its economy further after becoming an upper-middle-income economy in 2011 through greater engagements with China.⁶⁸ This hypothesis speculated that while Thailand may not yet outright align with China over the United States, or the United States over China, its trajectory is likely heading toward bandwagoning with China. Thailand's growing strategic engagements, economic dependence, and improving diplomacy with China would have contributed to closer Sino-Thai relations and, possibly, declining Thailand-U.S. relations.

This thesis demonstrates that Thailand has not bandwagoned with China against the United States but, rather, the Kingdom has hedged between China and the United States. Although Sino-Thai strategic, economic, and military relations have grown substantially with Sino-Thai total trade, for instance, overtaking Thailand-U.S. total trade, such growth is reasonably expected since China is the regional economic powerhouse. Trade, then, is considered necessary to expand the Thai economy, not as a vehicle to strengthen Sino-Thai relations for political reasons. As for Sino-Thai military relations, their strengthening was not deliberately pursued by Thai state leaders with the intent to decrease Thailand-U.S. military relations in a relative sense. COBRA GOLD remains the apex of the Thailand-U.S. alliance, as well as the hallmarked multinational, multiservice military exercise in the

⁶⁸ "Thailand Now an Upper Middle Income Economy," World Bank, August 2, 2011, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2011/08/02/thailand-now-upper-middle-income-economy>.

Indo-Pacific—above that of any Sino-Thai military exercises. Finally, Sino-Thai diplomatic ties did grow, and, in some respects, may seem stronger than Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties, but that is due to Thai state leaders needing to cultivate legitimacy through countries that, unlike the United States, do not criticize their restraints on democracy.

The second hypothesis posited that the United States' relatively harsh condemnations of Thailand and its imposed sanctions following the 2006 and 2014 coups, and Thai domestic politics (namely, the political leaders' actions), did not lead to a decline in Thailand-U.S. relations since the 2006 coup. This hypothesis is also proven false. It proposed that military relations and engagements continued largely unabated, regardless of U.S. sanctions, due to the longstanding Thailand-U.S. relations whose cornerstone was built on a formidable strategic cooperation evident in Thailand's support of U.S. military campaigns in the Cold War and global war on terrorism. It argued that the military and security aspects of Thailand-U.S. relations are enduring pillars that helped maintain a stable Thailand-U.S. relationship.

The opposite of the second hypothesis emerged: U.S. criticism of Thailand's coups partly contributed to declining ties. U.S. sanctions mandated by law further deteriorated the alliance as Thailand's access to U.S. military financing, foreign assistance, and military education and training was suspended. This suspension was prolonged after the 2014 coup compared to the 2006 coup and, in both instances, the sanctions were pronounced enough to negatively affect Thailand-U.S. ties. Therefore, although the hypothesis was partly correct in that Thailand-U.S. military relations and engagements continued somewhat unabated through COBRA GOLD exercises, the alliance was not strong enough to fully overcome U.S. law and criticisms and, as a result, Thailand-U.S. relations became destabilized after the 2006 coup and largely remained so until normalization took hold in 2017. Moreover, U.S. efforts to normalize relations between the two coups when Thailand resumed civilian control were largely ineffective due to the inability of Thai leaders to project unambiguous foreign policy.

The third hypothesis postulated that a shift toward more ambiguous Thai foreign policies since the 2006 coup contributed to a decline in Thailand-U.S. relations across the board. This ambiguity was presumed to reflect Thai policymakers' willingness to court

both a democratic United States and an authoritarian China, despite Thailand being a U.S. treaty ally. The hypothesis also submitted that Thai political leaders' negative perceptions toward the United States interfering in Thai politics led to a decline in Thailand-U.S. relations. This would coincide with a growing, positive perception toward China among Thailand's political leaders, as noted in the phrase, "the Chinese and Thai are not remote but of the same family" and "the Chinese and Thais are brothers" (ไทย-จีน ใช้อื่นไกลพี่น้องกัน, Thai chin chai uen klai phi nong kan in Thai; or 中泰一家親, zhong tai yi jia qin in Chinese).⁶⁹ The latter suggests a culturalist explanation.

This third hypothesis did not hold true. Despite Thai leaders cultivating stronger Sino-Thai security, economic, and diplomatic relations, Thailand-U.S. relations did not suffer to any large or permanent degree as a result of strengthening Sino-Thai relations. Instead, COBRA GOLD—the bedrock of military relations—grew in sophistication and continued every year, economic relations grew, and diplomatic relations returned to near-normal in 2017 before Thailand resumed elections, thanks to a new foreign policy approach used by the Trump Administration.

E. METHODOLOGY

Analysis was divided into three periods: a 2001–05 baseline of Thailand-U.S. relations prior to the 2006 coup under the Thaksin Administration, followed by the post-2006 coup period from 2006–14, and concluding with the post-2014 coup period from 2014–19. To understand and explain how Thailand-U.S. relations have evolved from 2001–19, data was compiled on Thailand-U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic relations.

For the military sector, this thesis analyzed military exercises, U.S. foreign military financing (FMF), foreign military sales (FMS), U.S. funding for excess defense articles (EDA), and U.S. funding to the International Military and Education Training (IMET)

⁶⁹ Busbarat, "Choosing Between 'Family' and 'Friend': A Preliminary Examination of Identities in Thai Foreign Policymaking toward China and the United States," 5; Michael R. Chambers, "'The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers': The Evolution of the Sino–Thai Friendship," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 35 (2005): 599–629, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560500205100>.

program. For economic relations, it dissected Thailand-U.S. trade, foreign direct investments (FDI) by the United States, and development assistance to Thailand. For diplomacy, it focused on the number and nature of high-level official visits between Thailand-U.S. state leaders using official press statements. These metrics provided a rigorous and consistent framework for assessing bilateral relations.

In order to obtain statistical data on Thailand-U.S. military exercises, FMF, FMS, EDA, and military personnel exchanges, data were compiled from the following: Thai and U.S. civic and military press releases, foreign military sales and financing and Department of Defense (DOD) databases, IMET, U.S. Department of State, House Committee on Foreign Affairs; Congressional Research Services, U.S. embassies in Thailand and China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, the Asia Foundation in San Francisco and Bangkok, and the Joint United States Military Advisory Group (JUSMAG). These sources provided quantitative data and qualitative information on military exercises such as COBRA GOLD, along with the duration and nature of Thailand-U.S. military exchanges, and the types and number of military weapons sold to Thailand.

Considering Sino-Thai relations in this era of great power competition, this thesis briefly drew on similar Chinese databases, as well as China's defense white papers. Data were gathered from open sources, including news articles, as well as Chinese and Thai embassies, to understand what types of exercises and foreign military sales and financings have been and are being conducted between the two countries.

To conduct a thorough analysis of Thailand-U.S. economic relations, and, briefly, Thai-Sino economic relations, the thesis obtained data from the World Trade Organization (WTO), U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, RAND Corporation, UN Comtrade Database, Office of the United States Trade Representative, U.S. Trade Numbers, Global EDGE, The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), and the Royal Thai Embassies in the United States and China. These databases and webpages contain archived and updated data on Thailand's trade and investments with foreign countries. They also provided context for Thailand's trade agreements and economic relations with foreign partners.

Data on Thailand-U.S. and Thai-Sino diplomatic relations was obtained from the following sources: White House briefing statements and foreign policies, U.S. State Department, DOD, U.S. Office of the Historian, Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Royal Thai Embassies in the United States and China. Their webpages confer information on Thai and U.S. foreign policies regarding each other, as well as Thai foreign policies toward China.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

Subsequent chapters are organized as follows: The second focuses on Thailand-U.S. military relations by analyzing the COBRA GOLD military exercise and funding to FMF, FMS, EDA, and the IMET programs. The third addresses Thailand-U.S. economic relations, analyzing total bilateral trade, U.S. FDI to Thailand, and U.S. development assistance to Thailand. The fourth explores Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations by examining the frequency and nature of high-level official visits between Thailand and U.S. state leaders, press releases, leaders' statements, and official documents. The fifth chapter presents and analyzes the findings, discusses which of the three hypotheses held up, and provides policy recommendations and further avenues for studying Thailand-U.S. relations.

II. THAILAND-U.S. MILITARY RELATIONS

After analyzing the evolution of Thailand-U.S. military relations from 2001 to 2019, this chapter concludes that, on balance, security relations remained strong between these long-term partners. It first covers Thailand-U.S. relations in the years before the 2006 coup—the Thaksin years—(2001–2006) before moving to the years after the 2006 coup (2007–2014), and finally to the years after the 2014 coup (2015–2019). It found that a reduction in U.S. economic assistance via the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs was the primary negative impact on bilateral relations as a result of the 2006 and 2014 coups, as well as on Excess Defense Articles (EDA) grants—barring the lack of EDA data for 2005. COBRA GOLD exercises and Foreign Military Sales (FMS), on the other hand, continued to thrive, albeit with some significant changes to the exercises, which were not necessarily the result of the coups.

The strongest pillar of Thailand-U.S. relations is security cooperation, which is underscored throughout Thailand-U.S. strategic cooperation from 2001 to 2006.⁷⁰ But because U.S. law mandated that Washington impose sanctions on U.S. funding to Thailand due to the 2006 and 2014 coups, some negative implications manifested.⁷¹ The impact of U.S. sanctions related to these two coups varied considerably. While the post-2006 sanctions minimally affected Thailand-U.S. military ties, the lingering effects of those imposed post-2014 remain.

The U.S. response to the 2006 coup brought minimal impact to COBRA GOLD and only briefly affected funding to the FMS, FMF, EDA, and IMET programs. The same cannot be said about the 2014 coup where COBRA GOLD and FMS remain largely unaffected, but funding to FMF, EDA, and IMET are still gravely impacted. Paradoxically, in spite of sanctions, COBRA GOLD continued to evolve into a robust multinational and

⁷⁰ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. IF10253.

⁷¹ Section 7008 of the H.R.2855, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act.

multiservice exercise with 29 observers in 2019. But the same positive outcomes cannot be seen with regard to FMF, EDA, and IMET programs. Since the 2014 coup, the United States has suspended \$3.5 million in FMF and \$85,000 in IMET funding to Thailand.⁷² Based on a 2008 to 2018 Defense Security Cooperation Agency report on EDA, the United States also stopped EDA grants to Thailand, albeit with no explanation as to why.⁷³

A. THAILAND-U.S. MILITARY RELATIONS: THE THAKSIN YEARS (2001–2006)

The immediate period leading up to the 2006 coup is best categorized as the Thaksin years (2001–2006) where Thailand-U.S. military relations strengthened significantly with respect to military exercises (COBRA GOLD) with strong regional engagements. Thailand-U.S. military relations expanded with Thailand's contributions to the U.S. global war on terrorism, and, following the 2006 coup, declined temporarily in the areas of military assistance (FMS, FMF, EDA, and IMET).⁷⁴ The strengthening of ties through COBRA GOLD still comes as a surprise, considering that analysts were initially concerned about the strength of the Thailand-U.S. alliance under the leadership of Thai nationalist Thaksin Shinawatra.⁷⁵ Upon taking office in February 2001, Thaksin gave less priority to external security affairs compared to his predecessors and initially continued this approach after the United States called upon its allies to support the U.S. global war

⁷² Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. IF10253.

⁷³ Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) (database; accessed November 17, 2019), https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/eda_public_report_4-6-18.xlsx.

⁷⁴ Thaksin Shinawatra was a telecommunications tycoon who was distinguished from 2001 to 2005 as the only Thai prime minister to have ever completed a full term in office before he was ousted via a coup in 2006. He ascended to office on February 9, 2001, to the surprise of several U.S. politicians who placed their confidence in the election of Chuan Leekpai from the Democrat Party, and his ascension was a cause for alarm to many U.S. policymakers given his nationalist overtures. As Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand describe it, Thaksin's policies and rhetoric mirrored that of former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad, who was well-known for his 1980s "Look East" policy of self-reliance and preference of what he labeled "Asian," not Western, values. McCargo and Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of a Thailand*; Benjamin Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

⁷⁵ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

on terrorism campaign after 9/11.⁷⁶ Thaksin sought instead to adopt a business-oriented approach toward Thailand foreign policy. Nevertheless, within weeks following the 9/11 attack and former President Bush calling upon American allies for support, Thaksin adapted his foreign policy to include more strategic considerations.

In early October 2001, Thaksin authorized U.S. ships to visit Thai ports and permitted the United States over-flight rights and refueling aircraft capabilities at U-tapao airbase, thereby signaling Thailand's overt support of the U.S. global war on terrorism.⁷⁷ Two months later on December 14, 2001, Thaksin met Bush at the White House to discuss strategic and economic partnership goals.⁷⁸ The meeting concluded with Bush boasting that Thaksin's visit was "further confirmation that our longtime friend will be a steady ally in the fight against terror."⁷⁹ In September 2003, Thailand deployed 443 of its troops alongside U.S. forces in Iraq to assist with the United States' nation-building efforts in Iraq.⁸⁰ Thailand's alignment with and support of its American ally led Bush to designate the Kingdom as a Major Non-NATO Ally in October 2003. Therefore, notwithstanding initial concerns about Thaksin's nationalistic and business-oriented policies, Thailand-U.S. military ties grew significantly stronger during the Thaksin years as measured in terms of COBRA GOLD, FMS, FMF, EDA, and IMET engagements between Thailand and the United States.

1. Exercise COBRA GOLD

COBRA GOLD exercises from 2001 to 2006 reflected growing Thailand-U.S. military ties despite periodic fluctuations in the numbers of U.S. troops and Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) participating in the exercises, which may initially reflect unstable

⁷⁶ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010).

⁷⁷ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 466-68.

⁷⁸ "The United States and the Global Coalition Against Terrorism, September 2001–December 2003," U.S. Office of the Historian, June 2004, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5889.htm>.

⁷⁹ U.S. Office of the Historian, "The United States and the Global Coalition Against Terrorism, September 2001–December 2003."

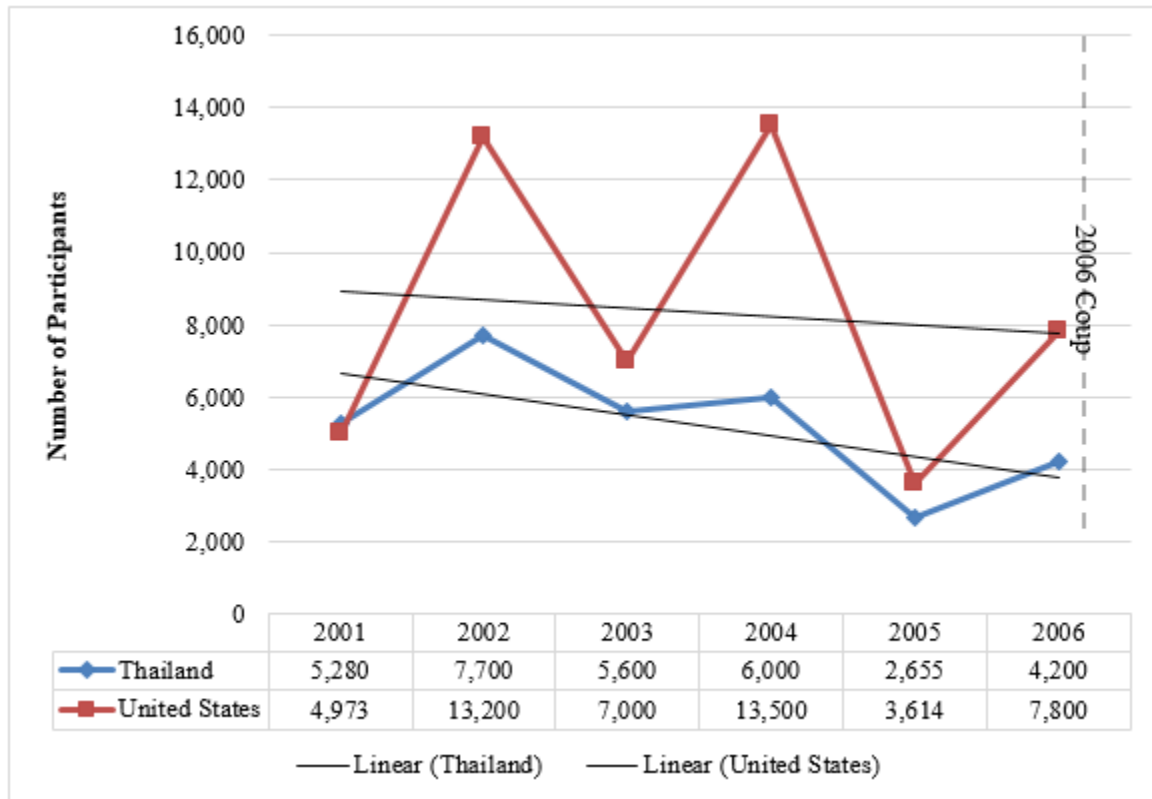
⁸⁰ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 469.

relations. In reality, the varying numbers of U.S. participants each year, as illustrated in Figure 1, are attributable to the strength of Thailand-U.S. relations, on the one hand, and a significant increase in U.S. military commitments in other parts of the world, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, on the other.⁸¹ On average, and as shown in Figure 1 with the upper black trend line, the number of U.S. military personnel slightly decreased throughout the period. As for the fluctuation in numbers of RTARF participants, variations are in response to the decrease in size and scope of COBRA GOLD exercises in any given year.⁸² On average, shown with the lower black trend line, the number of Thailand military-personnel also decreased during the Thaksin years.

⁸¹ Storey, *Thailand's Post-Coup Relationships with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington*.

⁸² Email message to JUSMAGTHAI, October 10, 2019.

Figure 1. Number of Participants in Exercise COBRA GOLD under the Thaksin Administration: 2001–2006⁸³



Two further points must be considered before analyzing the data in Figure 1, which presents the numbers of U.S. and RTARF forces participating in COBRA GOLD during the Thaksin years: the history and significance of COBRA GOLD in relation to Thailand-

⁸³ Maung Maung Oo and John S. Moncrief, “Cobra Gold Goes North,” *Irrawaddy*, May 16, 2001, https://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=3376; “Adm. Fargo Touts Yearly Drill to Deal with Terror in Pacific: Exercise Cobra Gold Involves Singapore, America, and Thailand,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 26, 2002, <http://archives.starbulletin.com/2002/05/26/news/index9.html>; David Boey, “SAF Joins U.S. and Thailand in Major War Games - Involving 13,000 Troops, the Joint Exercise Will Also Cover Counter-terrorism; 11 Countries Have Sent Observers to Thailand,” *Straits Times*, May 17, 2003, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/10015B2C1A92DC7F?p=AWNB>; “Thailand: Optimism Over Cobra Gold,” *Nation*, May 25, 2004, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/102E15308E3145DA?p=AWNB>; “Japan, in a First, to Join International War Games: Jane’s,” *Agence France-Presse*, March 4, 2005, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/108C1EAACA31C44B?p=AFNB>; Rugsithi Denny Meelarp, “Sideline democracy?: Explaining the United States’ response to Thailand’s 2006 and 2014 coups d’état” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2016), 141, <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/49345>.

U.S. military relations and the data sources. First, COBRA GOLD's developments throughout the Thaksin years—and to the present—have transformed the exercises into the United States' largest multinational and multiservice humanitarian-assistance and disaster-relief military exercise in the Indo-Pacific, as well as the pride of the RTARF.⁸⁴ This is significant, given that at the time of its inception in 1982, COBRA GOLD may have been the largest U.S. military exercise in Southeast Asia since the Vietnam War, but it was only a bilateral exercise between Thailand and the United States.⁸⁵ Since then, not only has COBRA GOLD evolved into an annual, multinational and multiservice exercise conducted in Thailand, the exercise now includes 29 participants and observers from other countries. COBRA GOLD is described as a Thailand-U.S. co-sponsored Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) and Joint Theater Security Cooperation (JTSC) exercise that enable Washington to showcase its security commitments to the region and the RTARF to strengthen its capabilities in responding to regional contingencies and in defending the nation.⁸⁶

Second, the data researched, obtained, and assessed in Figure 1 require a caveat. To start, information requested and received from the Royal Thai Army (RTA) and JUSMAGTHAI on the number of RTARF and U.S. participants does not include the Thaksin years. JUSMAGTHAI only had data from 2007 to 2019 whereas the RTA provided information on all participants—to include observers—from 2012 to 2019. Even then, JUSMAGTHAI's data from 2007 to 2010 are incomplete, with either parts or all of

⁸⁴ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. IF10253. The first COBRA GOLD exercise commenced in 1982 with two branches from Thailand's and the United States' armed forces: The Royal Thai Navy (RTN), Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF), U.S. Navy (USN), and U.S. Marine Corps (USMC). USARPAC also notes that the U.S. Army (USA) joined COBRA GOLD for the first time in 1984. "COBRA GOLD: A Look at 25 Years of History," U.S. Army Pacific Command, accessed June 14, 2019, https://www.usarpac.army.mil/pdfs/Cobra_Gold_25th.pdf.

⁸⁵ Suchi Bunbongkarn and Sukhumbhand Paribatra, "Thai Politics and Foreign Policy in the 1980s: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?," in *ASEAN in Regional and Global Context*, ed. Karl D. Jackson et al. (California: UC Berkeley, 1986), 20.

⁸⁶ "Cobra Gold 19: The 38th Iteration of Cobra Gold Begins," *U.S. Marines*, February 7, 2019, <https://www.marines.mil/News/Marines-TV/video/659038/dvpTag/engaged/dvpcc/false/#DVIDSVideoPlayer27131>; *COBRA GOLD 2018* (Hawaii: Center for Excellence in Disaster Management & Humanitarian Assistance (CFE-DM), 2018), <https://www.cfe-dmha.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=0gfO3VWnhMo%3d&portalid=0>; "Current Cooperation, 1976–2008," Royal Thai Embassy in Washington, D.C., accessed June 14, 2019, <http://thaiembdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Part3Elephant.pdf>.

the number of U.S. troops and RTARF participants missing. A search of military journals and databases revealed conflicting data from 2001 to 2006 with the majority of the sources failing to report specific numbers. Because the number of COBRA GOLD participants could not be obtained from these primary sources, the information collected for COBRA GOLD 2001–2006 came from an aggregate of open source information—specifically, archived news reporting from the United States and overseas. Data from these articles were compared to extract the most consistent and similarly reported data.

Figure 1 indicates wide fluctuations in the number of U.S. forces and RTARF participating in COBRA GOLD from 2001–2006. COBRA GOLD 2001 saw the United States and Thailand each contributing an average of 5,126 military personnel to the exercise (5,280 RTARF and 4,973 U.S. forces) with the objective of U.S. Special Forces training the RTA in border security and to combat illegal narcotics coming from Burma into Thailand.⁸⁷ The number of military personnel grew significantly the following year, peaking with 7,700 RTARF and 13,200 U.S. forces participating in the exercise—a sizeable 46 percent increase for Thailand but an even more impressive 165 percent increase for the United States. COBRA GOLD 2003, however, witnessed a moderate decline in the number of participants on the Thai side and a considerable decline on the U.S. side: RTARF dropped by 27 percent from 7,700 to 5,600, while U.S. forces fell by 47 percent from 13,200 to 7,000, albeit still well above their 2001 figures.

The number of participants from both countries increased again in COBRA GOLD 2004: RTARF increased 7 percent to 6,000 troops, while U.S. forces rebounded to just over their 2002 numbers, increasing sharply by 93 percent to 13,500 troops. In a parallel seesaw pattern of increases and decreases, COBRA GOLD 2005 brought decreases in the number of participants from the Thailand military, down 56 percent to 2,655 personnel, and the U.S. military, down 73 percent to 3,614 personnel. Finally, the figures again increased significantly for COBRA GOLD 2006, up 58 percent to 4,200 for Thailand and up 116 percent to 7,800 troops for the United States. Notably, the US consistently sent more troops

⁸⁷ Oo and Moncrief, “Cobra Gold Goes North.”

than Thailand with an average of 8,347 U.S. military members compared to Thailand's average of 5,239 military members.

Regional and international affairs during the Thaksin years heavily shaped COBRA GOLD. The nature of each COBRA GOLD exercise reflected the perceived threats at the time, and the number of participants reflected the state of Thailand-U.S. relations and other U.S. military commitments globally. Starting in 2001, the major threat posture in the Southeast Asian region—especially in Thailand—was illegal drugs crossing Thailand's borders from Burma,⁸⁸ whose Chinese drug traffickers were protected by the ethnic Wa rebel groups.⁸⁹ Thus, beginning in May 2001, U.S. Special Forces trained with their Thai counterparts in the 2001 COBRA GOLD exercise that focused on noncombatant evacuation and U.N. peacekeeping and law enforcement operations.⁹⁰ One of the objectives of COBRA GOLD 2001 was to strengthen U.S. Special Forces and Thai military ties and working relations. Specifically, the goal was to create a reference point for both forces to draw from when the U.S. Special Forces were scheduled to train their Thai counterparts in counter-narcotics operations one month later, in October. However, COBRA GOLD 2001 did not contain live-fire exercises, which is markedly different from

⁸⁸ This author chooses to use Burma, not Myanmar, to refer to Thailand's neighbor to its west. This is in line with U.S. State Department practice.

⁸⁹ Oo and Moncrief, "Cobra Gold Goes North"; "US Reported to Staff Thai Anti-Drug Crew," *API (USA)*, April 14, 2001, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/15569487D57C32C8?p=AWNB>.

⁹⁰ COBRA GOLD 2001 was smaller in scale and participation compared to COBRA GOLD 2000. The Thai government announced that it would scale back involvement due to financial difficulties stemming from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. For COBRA GOLD 2000, Thailand sent 5,000 troops while the United States sent 13,000 troops. Sheldon W. Simon, "U.S.-ASEAN Relations: New Military Cooperation but Continuing Political Tension," *Comparative Connections: A Quarter E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations* 3, no. 1 (2001): 50–57, <http://cc.pacforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/0101q.pdf>; AP, "Peacekeeping Military Exercise Kicks Off," *Straits Times*, May 10, 2000, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/101D5B6ED256EF0D?p=AWNB>; "U.S.-China Rivalry Looms in Asian Drug War," *Stratfor*, August 2, 2001, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/us-china-rivalry-looms-asian-drug-war#/home/error>; Oo and Moncrief, "Cobra Gold Goes North"; Michael Sheridan, "American Troops in Thai Drug Fight," *Sunday Times*, May 20, 2001, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/0F92AC4F8DCB2E72?p=AWNB>; "Thailand-Malaysia Redrawing Strategic Map of Southeast Asia," *Stratfor*, February 1, 2001, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/thailand-malaysia-redrawing-strategic-map-southeast-asia#/home/error>.

previous iterations focusing on conventional combat, but, nonetheless, included Singapore as another participant for the second year in a row.⁹¹

COBRA GOLD 2002, in comparison, occurred after the 9/11 attack and was therefore restructured to focus on anti-terrorism operations for the first time in the history of the exercise.⁹² The number of participants from Thailand and the United States increased to match the scale of the anti-terrorism component planned. Conversely, for COBRA GOLD 2003, concerns of the SARS disease outbreak and the U.S. military's preoccupation with its global war on terrorism campaign in Iraq led to smaller numbers of U.S. troops participating in the exercises, thereby affecting the number of RTARF participants as well.⁹³ On the observer side, COBRA GOLD 2003 welcomed Australia, China, India, Japan, Indonesia, Mongolia, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam to the scene. As a result, the 2003 exercises were significant and large, despite lower numbers of troops from Thailand and the United States.

Furthermore, COBRA GOLD 2003 incorporated peacekeeping and evacuation operations, as did COBRA GOLD 2004, which had Filipino and Mongolian participants and observers from ten Asian-Pacific and European countries, namely Australian, China, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam as observers.⁹⁴ Despite former U.S. Ambassador Darryl Johnson remarking at the COBRA GOLD 2004 opening ceremony that the majority of U.S. Marines who participated in COBRA GOLD 2002 and 2003 were now deployed in Iraq, both Thailand and the United States contributed greater number of participants to the exercise in 2004.⁹⁵ This is likely attributable to the goal of training COBRA GOLD 2004 participants in exercises aimed at

⁹¹ Simon, "U.S.-ASEAN Relations: New Military Cooperation but Continuing Political Tension," 54.

⁹² "Newswatch Police, Fire, Courts," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, May 8, 2001; Cole William, "Asia-Pacific War Drills Begin," *Honolulu Advertiser*, April 22, 2002, 4B.

⁹³ Boey, "SAF Joins U.S. and Thailand in Major War Games - Involving 13,000 Troops, the Joint Exercise Will Also Cover Counter-terrorism; 11 Countries Have Sent Observers to Thailand."

⁹⁴ Jack Barton, "Cobra Gold Exercises Kick Off in Thailand with Nearly 20,000 Soldiers," *Agence France-Presse*, May 13, 2004; <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/1028D6B8E947CBB4?p=AWNB>.

⁹⁵ Barton, "Cobra Gold Exercises Kick Off in Thailand with Nearly 20,000 Soldiers."

creating a rapid-response peacekeeping force and combatting terrorism, the latter of which was the Southeast Asian region's top priority and important to the United States as well.⁹⁶

Finally, as U.S. military commitments grew in the global war on terrorism, along with the reinforcements of RTARF in Iraq in 2003, participation in COBRA GOLD 2005 declined.⁹⁷ But the nature of the exercise incorporated a new aspect: an HA/DR component in response to the tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean in December 2004. COBRA GOLD 2005 also grew to include participants from Japan at the military and civilian government and non-government levels. As for COBRA GOLD 2006, it was the last of its kind under the Thaksin administration and contained an anti-terrorism operation for the fifth year in a row.⁹⁸ It likewise expanded in nature to incorporate a computer-simulated staff exercise component, thereby increasing the scale of the exercise. But the overall number of participants from Thailand, the United States, Singapore, Japan, and, Indonesia (a first-time participant after being an observer in 2004) at approximately 11,300 was noticeably smaller than earlier years—the total was 20,000 in 2004—due to U.S. commitments in Iraq preventing it from sending more participants.⁹⁹ Still, observers to COBRA GOLD 2006 came from nine Asian-Pacific and European countries: Australia, China, France, Germany, Laos, Malaysia, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam.

In sum, the start of the Thaksin administration saw the 2001 COBRA GOLD as a trilateral exercise between Thailand, the United States, and Singapore. By 2006, vastly expanded participation and observation meant COBRA GOLD had become a multinational and multiservice exercise symbolic of strong Thailand-U.S. military ties and regional leadership roles for both states.

⁹⁶ Barton, "Cobra Gold Exercises Kick Off in Thailand with Nearly 20,000 Soldiers."

⁹⁷ Boey, "SAF Joins U.S. and Thailand in Major War Games - Involving 13,000 Troops, the Joint Exercise Will Also Cover Counter-terrorism; 11 Countries Have Sent Observers to Thailand"; Barton, "Cobra Gold Exercises Kick Off in Thailand with Nearly 20,000 Soldiers"; *Agence France-Presse*, "Japan, in a First, to Join International War Games: Jane's."

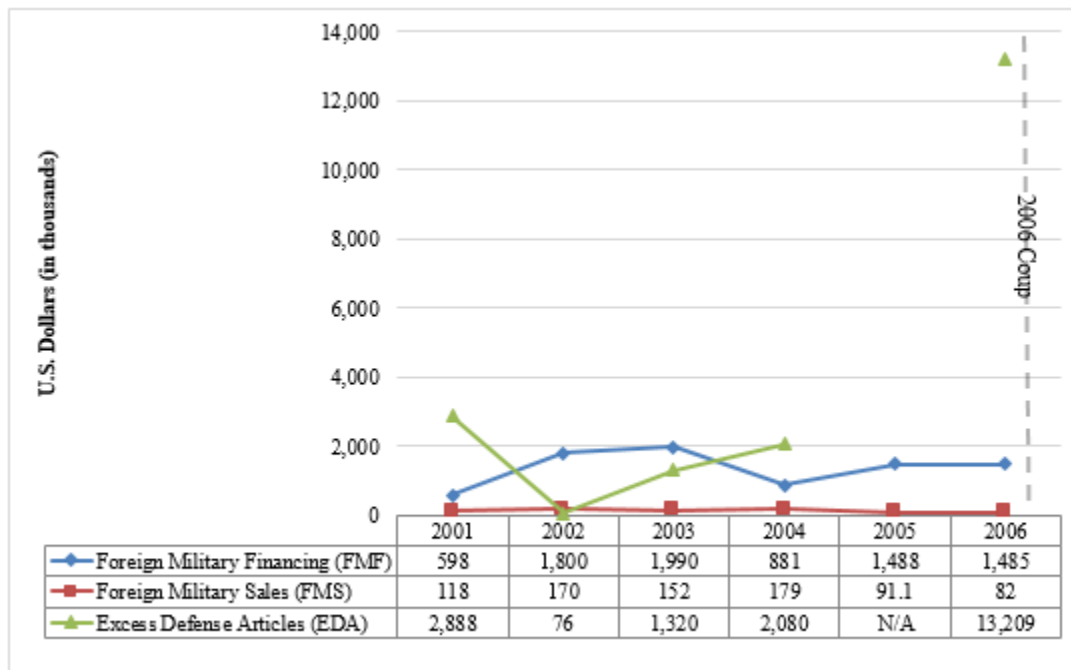
⁹⁸ "Thailand, U.S. Kick Off War Games," *Agence France-Presse*, Mar 15, 2006, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/111A1533BB665F97?p=AFNB>.

⁹⁹ *Agence France-Presse*, "Thailand, U.S. Kick Off War Games."

2. Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Financing, and Excess Defense Articles

Foreign Military Financing (FMF), Foreign Military Sales (FMS), and Excess Defense Articles (EDA) are all markers of stable Thailand-U.S. military relations during the Thaksin years despite some degrees of declining U.S. assistance via these programs throughout the period (Figure 2). Of note, the fact that Thailand was authorized access to these programs is an indicator of the strength of the Thailand-U.S. military ties during this time.

Figure 2. U.S. Security Assistance to Thailand under the Thaksin Administration: 2001–2006¹⁰⁰



The United States offered Thailand \$13 million in EDA in 2006, but the Kingdom did not accept.

The Arms Export Control Act of 1976 is a form of U.S. security assistance that may be provided to foreign countries.¹⁰¹ Under this act, the U.S. government is authorized to

¹⁰⁰ The data displayed in Figure 2 are collected from three major sources: the Security Monitor Assistance database, Defense Security Cooperation Agency, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Security Monitor Assistance and USAID reported matching figures on FMF and EDA while the Defense Security Cooperation Agency reported on FMS. These three agencies were selected as sources based on credibility and similar reporting statistics across all databases, regardless of the difference in government and private-sector affiliations. Security Assistance Monitor (Security Aid Pivot Table on Excess Defense Articles; accessed August 8, 2019), <http://securityassistance.org/data/country/military/Excess%20Defense%20Articles/2001/2020/all/East%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific//>; Security Assistance Monitor (Security Aid Pivot Table on Foreign Military Financing; accessed August 8, 2019), <http://securityassistance.org/data/country/military/Foreign%20Military%20Financing/2001/2020/all/East%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific//>; U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) (U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017; accessed June 14, 2019), [https://explorer.usaid.gov/reports/Financial Policy and Analysis Business Operations, Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales And Other Security Cooperation Historical Facts As of September 30, 2017](https://explorer.usaid.gov/reports/Financial%20Policy%20and%20Analysis%20Business%20Operations/Foreign%20Military%20Sales/Foreign%20Military%20Construction%20Sales%20and%20Other%20Security%20Cooperation%20Historical%20Facts%20As%20of%20September%2030%2C%202017) (Washington, DC: Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2017), https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/fiscal_year_series_-_30_september_2017.pdf.

¹⁰¹ “Foreign Military Sales,” Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.dsca.mil/programs/foreign-military-sales-fms>.

finance, sell, or grant defense services and equipment to designated foreign countries that may help strengthen U.S. security and international stability. Countries that are unable to purchase U.S. military equipment may request FMF from the U.S. government through the foreign military financing of direct commercial contracts program.¹⁰² The FMS program was also enacted through the Defense Security Cooperation Agency and allows sales of weapons to allies and partner states. Foreign countries may also obtain defense and arms transfers through the EDA program, which allows them to acquire excessed defense articles—that is, used and new U.S. equipment that is functional—through a grant or at reduced prices based on the equipment’s condition.¹⁰³

After three years of sharp increases in U.S. FMF to Thailand from 2001 to 2003, U.S. FMF to Thailand saw a sharp decline in 2004 to \$881,000, which was due to U.S. financing commitments to other parts of the world.¹⁰⁴ Iraq, specifically, was the largest recipient of U.S. financing in 2004 at over \$20 billion for reconstruction activities since mid-2003.¹⁰⁵ Still, because of the war on terrorism since 2001 and the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) and Global HIV/AIDS Initiative (GHAI) that commenced in 2004, the United States considerably raised economic assistance for counterterrorism objectives in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰⁶ Thailand was one of the beneficiaries of this increased financing with nearly \$1.5 million FMF received from its U.S. ally in 2005. Then, due to the 2006 coup, the U.S. State Department suspended nearly \$24 million in military and peacekeeping assistance to Thailand pursuant to Section 508 of the Foreign Operations

¹⁰² The U.S. Secretary of State is the governing body that decides which countries will have FMS and FMF programs while the U.S. Secretary of Defense executes said program. “Foreign Military Financing,” DSCA, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.dsca.mil/programs/foreign-military-financing-fmf>.

¹⁰³ “Excess Defense Articles,” DSCA, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.dsca.mil/programs/excess-defense-articles-eda>.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Lum, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*, CRS Report No. RL31362 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2006), 42, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20060827_RL31362_7e936bbc986438cb5ccf7426a4390be3d3dbfef5.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Curt Tarnoff and Larry Nowels, *Foreign Aid: An Introductory Overview of U.S. Programs and Policy*, CRS Report No. 98–916 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2005), 37, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/98-916.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Lum, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*, CRS Report No. RL31362 (2006).

Appropriations Act and suspended funding for counterterrorism assistance as previously authorized under Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2006.¹⁰⁷ The nearly \$24 million in military assistance was not reinstated until February 2008, thus showing early signs of the impact of the 2006 coup on Thailand-U.S. military relations.¹⁰⁸

U.S. FMS to Thailand increased steadily from 2001 to 2002, followed by a minor drop from \$170,598 in 2002 to \$152,435 in 2003. Although FMS increased to \$179,776 in 2004, the FMS dropped sharply to \$91,182 in 2005 and then more gradually to \$82,066 in 2006. While difficult to ascertain in Figure 2, the data from 2001 to 2004, on the whole, indicate stability in U.S. FMS to Thailand. The point of departure is 2005 where U.S. FMS declined by the tens of thousands, which is likely attributed to U.S. military assistance elsewhere globally and the extent of Thailand requesting purchase of U.S. military equipment.¹⁰⁹

Finally, when Bush designated the Kingdom as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2003, Thailand became eligible for greater access to EDA, which included depleted uranium anti-tank rounds, commercial satellites export licenses, stockpiling of U.S. defense materials, military training, and participation in military research and development projects.¹¹⁰ But specifically on EDA grants to Thailand from 2001 to 2008, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency reports no information predating 2008 in its current database. Figures on EDA grants from 2001 to 2004 were, instead, obtained from the Security Monitor Assistance and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) databases but with

¹⁰⁷ Section 1206 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2006 outlined the criteria for counter-terrorism assistance to U.S. foreign partners that was extended until FY2017. Thomas Lum, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*, CRS Report No. 31362 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL31362.pdf>; Nina M. Serafino, *Security Assistance Reform: "Section 1206" Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. RS22855 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 30, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RS22855.pdf>

¹⁰⁸ Lum, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*.

¹⁰⁹ Lum, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*.

¹¹⁰ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 468-69.

no explanation for the decline in the EDA grant amount for 2002.¹¹¹ The increase in the EDA grant amount in 2003 and 2004 was consistent with an overall increase in U.S. aid to the Southeast Asian region as a result of the need to grow the economy post-Asian Financial Crisis of 1997.¹¹² Furthermore, a search of historical archives for EDA grants in 2005 reveal ambiguous information. While the *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations* report indicated that Thailand was authorized EDA grants, it did not disclose the specific amounts.¹¹³ Rather, the report included the EDA grant numbers in sum with total FMF and FMS amounts and did not clarify whether the offered EDA grant was ultimately delivered, thereby making it difficult to accurately calculate the EDA grant based off of the reported FMF and FMS amounts. While the United States awarded \$13 million in EDA to Thailand in 2006, the Kingdom did not accept the grant.¹¹⁴ No information could be found as to why Thailand declined the EDA grant in 2006. Given these data gaps, it is best to analyze the FMF and FMS data in Figure 2 to understand the impact of the 2006 coup on Thailand-U.S. relations.

3. International Military Education and Training (IMET)

The IMET program is another component of Thailand-U.S. security cooperation whose funding reflected normal fluctuations and world events. The importance of the Thailand-U.S. bilateral relationship is reflected in the millions of dollars the United States devoted to its IMET program with Thailand from 2001 to 2006, with an overall increase realized during the Thaksin Administration (see Figure 3). Funding levels minimally

¹¹¹ Security Assistance Monitor, Security Aid Pivot Table on Excess Defense Articles; USAID, U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017.

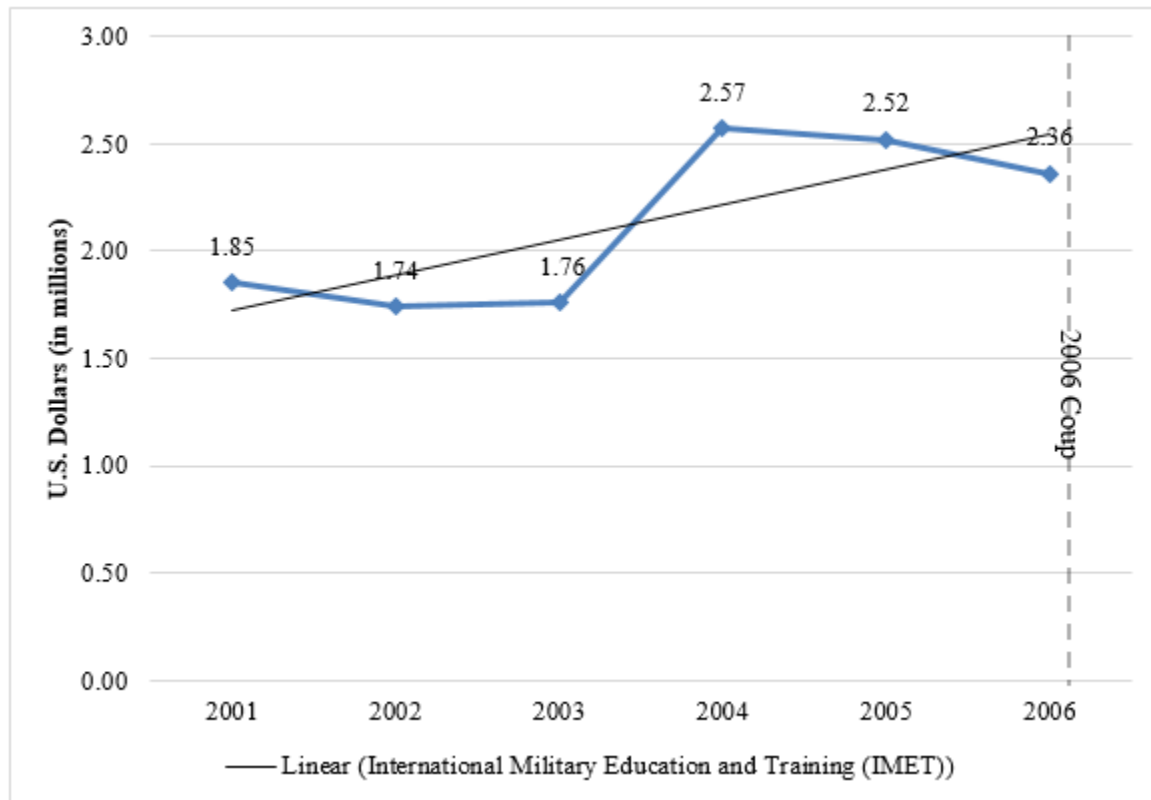
¹¹² Thomas Lum, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*, CRS Report No. RL31362 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2002), 28, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a478813.pdf>.

¹¹³ Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations for 2005: A Hearing before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations. 108th Cong., 2nd sess., July 1, 2004; Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations for 2006: A Hearing before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations. 109th Cong., 1st sess., July 2, 2005; Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations for 2007: A Hearing before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations. 109th Cong., 2nd sess., July 10, 2006.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for Fiscal Year 2008* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2007), https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PCAAB546.pdf.

declined from 2001 to 2003 until nearly doubling in 2004, before gradually decreasing again in 2005 and 2006.

Figure 3. U.S. Financing to the IMET Program with Thailand under the Thaksin Administration: 2001–2006¹¹⁵



The IMET program was established under the International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976 and provides military education and training to foreign military and civilian personnel through attendance at U.S. facilities.¹¹⁶ The program’s objective is to “encourage effective and mutually beneficial relations and increased

¹¹⁵ Security Assistance Monitor (Security Aid Pivot Table on International Military Education and Training; accessed November 19, 2019), <http://securityassistance.org/data/country/military/International%20Military%20Education%20and%20Training/2001/2020/all/East%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific/>.

¹¹⁶ International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976, Public Law 94-329, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 729 (1976): 2347, codified at *U.S. Code* 22 (1976) §§ 36 et seq.

understanding between the United States and foreign countries in furtherance of the goals of international peace and security” and foster future U.S. alliances while enhancing transnational joint operation interoperability.¹¹⁷ The payoff is considered substantial, given that several prominent, high-ranking officials in the RTARF and civilian Thailand agencies obtained U.S. education and training through the IMET program.¹¹⁸ However, it is necessary to caveat that the impact of the 2006 coup on the IMET program cannot be fully appreciated in dollar amounts until 2007 because the coup happened near at the end of fiscal year 2006, well after funding had been approved and dispersed.

Nevertheless, U.S. IMET funding for Thailand from 2001 to 2003 held steady at an average of \$1.78 million over the first three years of Thaksin’s premiership. In 2004, IMET funding increased significantly from \$1.76 million in 2003 to \$2.57 million in 2004. This swift rise was a result of greater investment in IMET development initiatives in Southeast Asia, in general, with the goal of creating more professional militaries to contribute to more acceptable civil-military relations and human rights records as part of the global war on terrorism.¹¹⁹ The United States maintained a higher level of IMET funding to Thailand in 2005 at \$2.52 million and 2006 at \$2.36 million compared to 2001–2003. Figures for these years reflected slightly less funding due to more funding going to the Philippines, the

¹¹⁷ International Security Assistance and Arms Export Control Act of 1976, 5; The U.S. Department of State is the governing body that decides which countries will have IMET programs, while the U.S. Secretary of Defense executes the program. “International Military Education Training,” DSCA, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.dscamilitaryeducationtraining-imet>.

¹¹⁸ In 1952, the United States established an IMET program with Thailand and trained 58 Thai military officers that same year. The United States did so with the intent of helping professionalize the RTARF along with improving their technical training and professional military education (PME). American-taught PME, at the time, was understood as almost a prerequisite for promotion opportunities, especially within the Royal Thai Army (RTA), and that U.S. training equated to obtaining advanced tactical skills knowledge. Moreover, IMET was seen as an avenue to create a positive impact by exposing future foreign military leaders who could one day become high-ranking U.S. military allies who shared American democratic values, cultures, and ideals, which, in turn, could also lead to more cooperative professional relationships and cultural understanding. Jennifer Taw, *Thailand and the Philippines: Case Studies in U.S. IMET Training and Its Role in Internal Defense and Development* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1994), 88, www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR159.html.

¹¹⁹ Federation of American Scientists, *Military Assistance* (Washington, DC: Federation of American Scientists, 2004), <https://fas.org/asmp/profiles/aid/fy2004/cbj05-mil.pdf>.

largest beneficiary of U.S. FMF and IMET in 2005.¹²⁰ As previously discussed, the 2006 coup caused Washington to suspend approximately \$24 million in U.S. economic assistance to Thailand, which negatively affected the Kingdom's participation in the IMET program beginning in late 2006 and continuing until February 2008.

4. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Military Relations under the Thaksin Administration

Thailand-U.S. military relations during the Thaksin Administration were arguably strong and served as the foundation of the alliance. COBRA GOLD expanded in scale and operations throughout the period to include additional participants from Singapore and Japan and observers from nearly a dozen countries that helped foster interoperability with Thailand and U.S. forces. In March 2003, former Navy Admiral Thomas B. Fargo went as far as to argue that COBRA GOLD was the “centerpiece” of the Thailand-U.S. alliance, and the multinational dimension of the exercise provides Thailand an active role in promoting regional cooperation.¹²¹

The period brought an uptick in military aid. U.S. FMF and FMS to Thailand were generally stable. Despite the lack of available data on U.S. EDA grants to Thailand for 2005, the years in which they were provided also indicated impressive grant amounts in the millions, with exception to the unexplained sharp decline in 2002. IMET funding nearly doubled in size in 2004. Together, the United States' military sales and economic assistance helped the RTARF make progress toward modernizing its military. At the start of the 21st century, one of the earliest signs of strengthening Thailand-U.S. military relations was found in Thailand purchasing an advanced U.S. medium-range air-to-air missiles (Amraam) for its F-16 fighter planes in July 2001.¹²² This purchase distinguished Thailand as the first Southeast Asian country to acquire the system from the United States.

¹²⁰ Federation of American Scientists, *East Asia and the Pacific* (Washington, DC: Federation of American Scientists, 2005), https://fas.org/asmp/profiles/aid/fy2005/CBJ05_EastAsia.pdf; Lum, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*, CRS Report No. RL31362 (2006).

¹²¹ Satu P. Limaye, “Minding the Gaps: The Bush Administration and U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2004): 73–93, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/387755/pdf>.

¹²² Limaye, “Minding the Gaps: The Bush Administration and U.S.-Southeast Asia Relations,” 85.

Therefore, despite the damning effects of the 2006 coup, Thailand-U.S. military relations had a strong baseline to build upon once Thailand restored its democracy.

B. THAILAND-U.S. MILITARY RELATIONS: AFTER THE 2006 COUP (2006–2014)

The years after the 2006 coup and before the 2014 coup highlighted major changes in the military exercise and economic-assistance sectors of Thailand-U.S. military relations that suggest an improvement in some areas and deterioration in others. What is striking, however, about the immediate period following the 2006 coup is that U.S. officials criticized the coup and expressed concerns about the situation, but still worked closely with the RTARF to combat terrorism.¹²³ U.S. officials argued that the coup was a “special case,” a reaction to the unforeseen and sustained mass protests that expanded after perceived irregularities during Thaksin’s April 19, 2006, snap parliamentary elections and other administrative maneuverings that the opposition believed were severely weakening democratic institutions.¹²⁴ Furthermore, the Bush Administration minimized criticism of the coup due to widespread skepticism as to whether Thaksin’s transfer of power to his deputy, Chidchai Vanasatidya, during the snap-election voting period was constitutionally legal.¹²⁵

Nevertheless, Washington was still mandated by U.S. law to enact sanctions on U.S. economic assistance to Thailand’s military, which affected Thailand-U.S. military relations. The scale of COBRA GOLD decreased relative to where it had been during Thaksin’s Administration with lowered U.S. participation and cancelled combat exercise components. Moreover, FMF and FMS did not recover to the same levels they had enjoyed during the Thaksin years, instead fluctuating minimally from 2006 to 2014. And, similar

¹²³ Richard P. Cronin, *The Second Bush Administration and Southeast Asia* (Washington, DC: The Henry L. Stimson Center, 2007), https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/45521/Bush-SEA_KF_Cronin_17July2007.pdf; “Thai Military Launches Coup against PM,” *NBC News*, September 19, 2006, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/14906669/ns/world_news-asia_pacific/t/thai-military-launches-coup-against-pm/#.XdxPKOhKguU.

¹²⁴ Cronin, *The Second Bush Administration and Southeast Asia*.

¹²⁵ Cronin, *The Second Bush Administration and Southeast Asia*; “Thais Elect Senate in Thaksin’s Shadow,” *New York Times*, April 19, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/19/world/asia/thais-elect-senate-in-thaksins-shadow.html>.

to 2001–06, available sources on EDA grant data still reported ambiguous and incomplete information for this period although the Defense Security Cooperation Agency reported a significant spike in U.S. EDA grants to Thailand in 2011.

Analyzing U.S.-Thailand relations between the September 19, 2006, coup and May 22, 2014, coup is complicated by five prime ministers leading Thailand during this period, none of whom were able to sustain a cohesive foreign policy plan on Thailand-U.S. military relations before the next changeover. General Surayud Chulanont took control of the government from October 2006 to January 2007 following Thaksin's ousting via coup in September 2006.¹²⁶ Elected civilian Samak Sundaravej, who led from January 2007 to September 2008 until Thailand's Constitutional Court forced him to resign through its ruling that Samak's paid appearance on a Thai cooking show violated constitutional law, followed Surayud.¹²⁷ Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law, was elected through parliamentary vote to replace Samak in September 2008.¹²⁸ However, Somchai, too, was forced to step down as prime minister in December 2008 after the Constitutional Court found his party and two others guilty of electoral fraud.¹²⁹ Shortly after, Abhisit Vejjajiva, a member of parliament and career politician since 1992, was appointed prime minister after winning 235 parliamentary votes against the 198 votes Pracha Promnok, Abhisit's opponent and former national police chief, won in December 2008.¹³⁰ Abhisit led the

¹²⁶ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Diplomacy under Siege: Thailand's Political Crisis and the Impact on Foreign Policy," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2009): 447–467, <https://muse-jhu-edu.libproxy.nps.edu/article/370823>; Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

¹²⁷ Michael Sullivan, "Thai PM Fried for Stints on Cooking Show," *NPR*, September 9, 2008, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94423514>.

¹²⁸ "FACTBOX-Somchai Wongsawat, Thailand's New PM," *Reuters*, September 16, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/thailand-pm/factbox-somchai-wongsawat-thailands-new-pm-idUSBKK3702620080917>.

¹²⁹ Matthew Weaver, "Thailand Prime Minister to Step Down after Court Strips Him of Office," *Guardian*, December 2, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/dec/02/thailand-protests-somchai-wongsawat>.

¹³⁰ "Profile: Abhisit Vejjajiva," *BBC*, July 3, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13298394>; Seth Mydans, "Thai Parliament Picks New Premier," *New York Times*, December 14, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/16/world/asia/16thailand.html>.

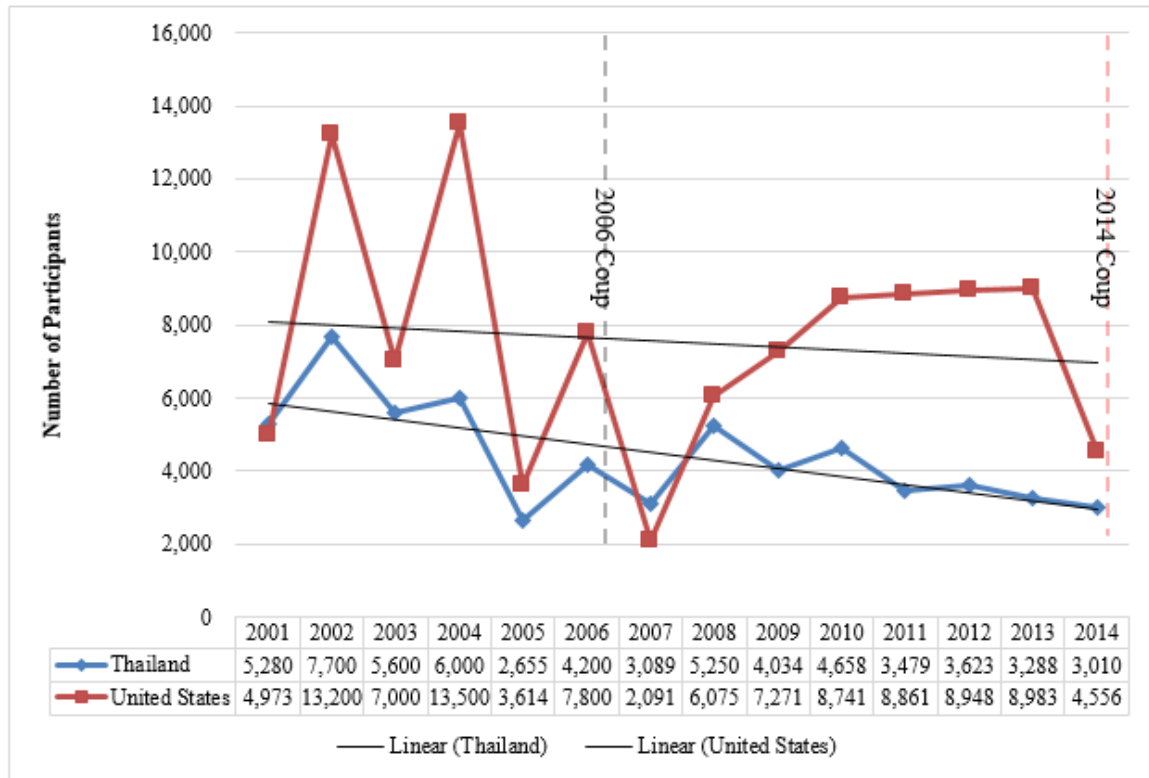
government until August 2011 when civilian Yingluck Shinawatra was elected prime minister; she ruled until her ousting via coup in May 2014.

Even so, regardless of Thailand's frequent changes in prime ministers between 2006 and 2014, and despite U.S. policymakers' swift condemnation of the 2006 coup, it appears that Thailand-U.S. military relations were not significantly affected by the coup. This may be because the country's coup leaders promptly transferred state control to civilian leaders, and some U.S. officials were ambivalent about the coup, given Thaksin's maleficence in office and highly contentious protests, especially in Bangkok. The coup's effects on Thailand-U.S. military relations, then, were not as severe as the initial U.S. sanctions on Thailand would lead one to believe. Indeed, it seemed that the United States rewarded Thailand's efforts to return to democracy during this period of ongoing internal unrest.

1. Exercise COBRA GOLD

Both Thailand and the United States cut back their participation in COBRA GOLD during the political unrest of 2005, sought to reinvest in the exercises in 2006 before the coup, then felt the negative impact of the coup with a significant drop in COBRA GOLD engagement in 2007 (see Figure 4). The data also reflect increases in the number of U.S. participants from 2008 to 2013, a temporary uptick in Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTARF) participants in 2008, followed by gradual declines in Thailand's participation from 2009 to 2014, a period of deepening and expanding political protests. Nonetheless, the number of U.S. forces and RTARF participating in COBRA GOLD, like the pre-2006 coup years, still trended downward as indicated by the two black trend lines. Data obtained on the number of COBRA GOLD participants from 2007 to 2014 are derived from a combination of archived news articles and data from the Royal Thai Army (RTA) and Joint United States Military Advisory Group Thailand (JUSMAGTHAI). Data on COBRA GOLD from 2001 to 2006 is also included in Figure 4 for comparison.

Figure 4. Number of Participants in Exercise COBRA GOLD after the 2006 Coup: 2007–2014¹³¹



In the wake of the September 19, 2006, coup, COBRA GOLD 2007 proceeded as planned, despite the U.S. State Department announcing on September 28, 2006, that several

¹³¹ Oo and Moncrief, “Cobra Gold Goes North”; *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, “Adm. Fargo Touts Yearly Drill to Deal with Terror in Pacific: Exercise Cobra Gold Involves Singapore, America, and Thailand”; Boey, “SAF Joins U.S. and Thailand in Major War Games - Involving 13,000 Troops, the Joint Exercise Will Also Cover Counter-terrorism; 11 Countries Have Sent Observers to Thailand”; *Nation*, “Thailand: Optimism Over Cobra Gold”; *Agence France-Presse*, “Japan, in a First, to Join International War Games: Jane’s; Meelarp, “Sideline democracy?: Explaining the United States’ Response to Thailand’s 2006 and 2014 Coups d’état,” 141; Email message to JUSMAGTHAI, October 10, 2019; Royal Thai Army, email message to author, August 1, 2019.

forms of U.S. economic assistance to Thailand would be suspended per U.S. law.¹³² During COBRA GOLD 2007's opening ceremony, former U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, Alexander A. Arvizu, remarked that "for a quarter century, Cobra Gold has been the most visible symbol of U.S. and Thai military cooperation... [and] makes the militaries of each of our countries better able to operate."¹³³ Still, 2007 reflected smaller Thailand and U.S. troop commitments than in 2006 prior to the coup and the lowest level of troops between 2001 and 2014 for the United States at just 2,091. Thailand sent 3,089 troops to participate in COBRA GOLD 2007, its second-lowest number since 2001 after COBRA GOLD 2005, where it sent just 2,622.

In May 2008, with Washington having restored economic assistance to the Kingdom after an election in Thailand, the number of participants from both Thailand and the United States doubled from lows of 3,089 and 2,091, respectively, in 2007.¹³⁴ COBRA GOLD 2008 also marked the first year China attended as an observer, although Thailand had asked its American ally to allow China to attend as early as 2001. The level of U.S. participation then increased by 20 percent from 7,271 troops in 2009 to 8,741 troops in 2010. Meanwhile, COBRA GOLD 2009 saw a 23 percent decrease in the number of RTARF participants, from 5,250 in 2008 to 4,034 in 2009, possibly due to the increase in total number of military exercises involving the United States, Thailand, and other regional partners—Cope Tiger, Red Flag, and CARAT—from 2001 to 2009. Multiple exercises

¹³² Section 7008 replaced Section 508 of the Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, which cited the same mandates and was the one referenced during the U.S. State Department press release. Section 7008 of the H.R.2855, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act "prohibits the use of funds... for assistance to any country whose elected head of government is deposed by military or military-supported coup or decree." H.R. 2855, *Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act before the House Committee on Appropriations*, 8; Emma Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2013), https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20131220_RL32593_d038ade5df87d4d642c235a3b639e11654082ea5.pdf.

¹³³ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "American Position vis-à-vis Thai Coup: Illusion Part One," *Prachatai*, May 31, 2014, <https://prachatai.com/english/node/4063>; "U.S., Thai Forces Train Despite Coup," *UPI*, May 11, 2007, <https://www.upi.com/Defense-News/2007/05/11/US-Thai-forces-train-despite-coup/39531178894260/>, 2.

¹³⁴ Email message to JUSMAGTHAI, October 10, 2019; Royal Thai Army, email message to author, August 1, 2019.

required the RTARF's attention at a time when Thailand's military was focused on governance within the state.¹³⁵

As for COBRA GOLD exercises from 2010 to 2014, RTARF participation slowly declined from 4,685 to 3,010, which may have been a result, in part, of emerging Sino-Thai military exercises that required greater involvement on Thailand's side. Likewise, the RTARF lacked sufficient capacity to send a greater number of troops to COBRA GOLD and faced competing mission requirements, such as a sizeable number of RTARF troops deploying to Thailand's southern provinces to fight an insurgency that resurfaced in 2005 after being dormant for twenty years.¹³⁶ Thailand's COBRA GOLD troop commitment by 2014 stood at 3,010, nearly half the level of 2001. It is worth noting, too, that South Korea joined COBRA GOLD, as a participant, not an observer, for the first time in 2010, and Malaysia followed suit in 2011, further contributing to the multination and regional strength of the exercise. Finally, U.S. forces in COBRA GOLD held steady from 2010–13 at around an average of 8,883, before constricting sharply by more than half to 4,556 in 2014. This unexpected drop followed the U.S. Navy ship *Sgt Matej Kocak* running aground in Japan.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, by the time COBRA GOLD 2014 ended in February, the exercise had evolved into the crown jewel of Thailand-U.S. military relations that allowed both countries to showcase their regional interoperability commitments—and, especially, their commitment to each other.

¹³⁵ Prasirtsuk, "An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the U.S. Alliance System," 115-32.

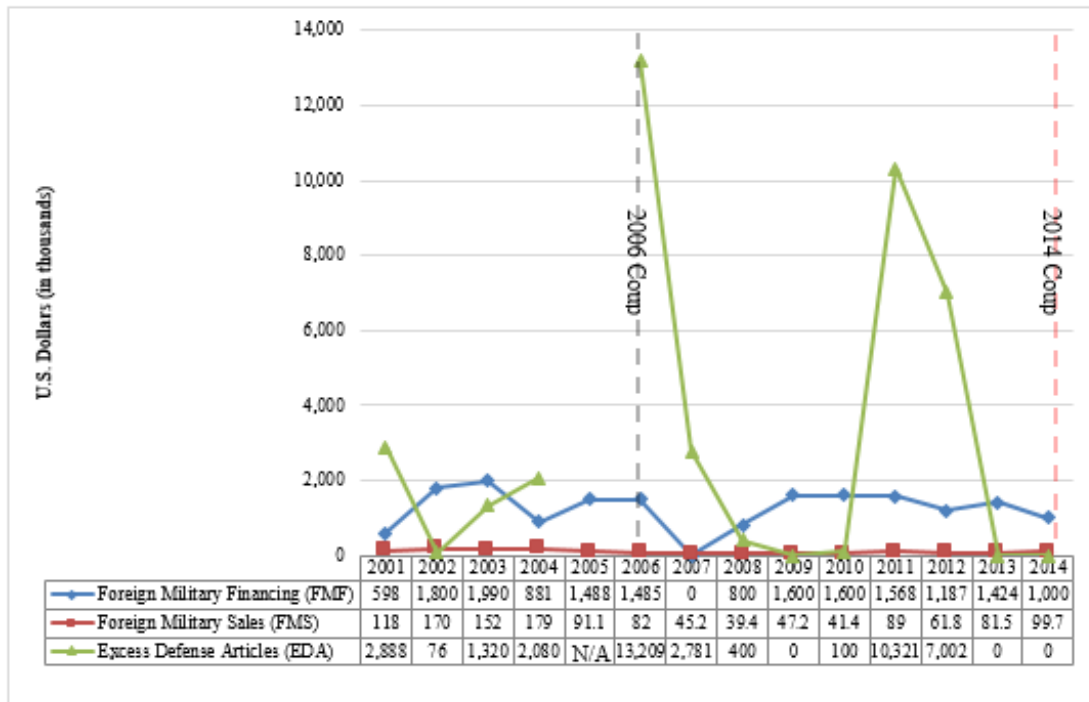
¹³⁶ Storey, *Thailand's Military Relations with China: Moving from Strength to Strength*; Zachary Abuza, *The Ongoing Insurgency in Southern Thailand: Trends in Violence, Counterinsurgency Operations, and the Impact of National Politics*, Institute for National Strategic Studies No. 6 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011), <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-6.pdf>.

¹³⁷ Wassana Nanuam, "Fewer U.S. Troops in Cobra Gold," *Bangkok Post*, February 3, 2015, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/465180/us-troop-size-in-cobra-gold-cut-to-4000-from-5000>.

2. Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Financing, and Excess Defense Articles

Figure 5 illustrates generally steady U.S. FMF and FMS assistance to Thailand in the years between the two coups, which points to stable and solid Thailand-U.S. military relations. U.S. EDA grants to Thailand, however, present a somewhat ambiguous picture due to the lack of explanation as to why EDA grants to Thailand stopped in 2009, 2013, and 2014. Nonetheless, it is likely that a sharp decline in EDA grants in 2008 and 2010 were either in response to the 2006 coup or the 2008 Global Financial Crisis that started in the United States, thereby impacting the amount of foreign assistance it would provide. Once elections resumed in 2007, U.S. EDA grants to the Kingdom increased sharply, although Thailand ultimately did not accept the EDA grants of \$10 million in 2011 and then only accepted a portion of the \$7 million EDA grant in 2012.

Figure 5. U.S. Security Assistance to Thailand after the 2006 Coup:
2007–2014¹³⁸



Thailand applied for and was awarded \$10 million in EDA grants in 2010 but ultimately did not accept them. Thailand accepted \$5.9 million of the \$7 million EDA grants in 2011.

Figure 5 includes data on FMF, FMS, and EDA from 2001 to 2006 to compare it against the data from 2007 to 2014, revealing an even longer stable level of support and engagement through these programs with the except of EDA grants. It illustrates that Thailand did not regain FMF economic assistance until democracy was restored following the 2006 coup.¹³⁹ Once elections were held in Thailand, the United States reinstated FMF assistance at the relatively low level of \$800,000 in 2008. However, this reduction, which

¹³⁸ Security Assistance Monitor, Security Aid Pivot Table on Excess Defense Articles; Security Assistance Monitor, Security Aid Pivot Table on Foreign Military Financing; USAID, U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017; Financial Policy and Analysis Business Operations, *Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales And Other Security Cooperation Historical Facts As of September 30, 2017*; U.S. Department of State, “Foreign Military Financing Account Summary,” accessed November 19, 2019, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/pm/ppa/sat/c14560.htm>; DSCA, (Database; accessed November 17, 2019).

¹³⁹ Security Assistance Monitor (Thailand; accessed June 14, 2019), <http://securityassistance.org/data/program/military/Thailand/2006/2020/all/Global/>.

was also reflected in lowered IMET funding in 2008, was due to the United States accommodating an increase in International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement funding to assist Thailand in responding to separatist violence in southern Thailand's ethnic Malay-Muslim provinces.¹⁴⁰ Still, with elections proceeding apace, this amount doubled to \$1.6 million in 2009 and remained relatively stable through 2013, which brought \$1.4 million in FMF to Thailand. While an aggregated search of open source and government databases did not find the actual amount of U.S. FMF to Thailand for 2014, the U.S. Department of State estimated \$1 million in funding, which still exceeded the assistance extended in 2008.¹⁴¹ Compared to the U.S. FMF provided to Thailand during the Thaksin administration, these increases from 2008–14 are considerably less than the triple digits Thailand once saw but are still impressive and indicators of stabilizing bilateral ties.

While FMS amounts between coups did not reach the highs seen in 2001 to 2004, the trends were generally stable from 2007 to 2014 and not much below the 2001–06 average of \$132,433. Particularly, there was an increase of FMS in 2011—the highest figure recorded during these years between the two coups—to \$89,093. This is arguably a reflection of U.S. economic assistance and military equipment sales to Thailand in support of the Kingdom's democratic elections between 2007 and 2014, a telling sign that Thailand-U.S. military relations rest, in part, upon Bangkok's democratic pillars.

Although clarification regarding EDA grants to Thailand is incomplete, two points can be drawn from the available data. First, levels of U.S. EDA grants to Thailand fluctuated wildly. EDA grants stood at \$2.7 million in 2007 and dropped substantially to \$400,000 in 2008. This may have been due to U.S. law mandating sanctions on U.S. aid to Thailand since the country's head of government was deposed via coup. However, it could also be in response to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis that sent several economies, including the United States', into a recession. It seems plausible that the United States was not in a position to make substantial grants to Thailand in 2008. Second, the exponential increase in EDA grants from a token low of \$100,000 in 2010 to \$10 million in 2011 and

¹⁴⁰ U.S. Department of State, "Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for Fiscal Year 2008."

¹⁴¹ U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Military Financing Account Summary."

then \$7 million in 2012 requires clarification. The Defense Security Cooperation Agency EDA database shows that in 2011 the United States allocated EDA grants to Thailand per the Kingdom's request for used military equipment to the tune of \$10 million. However, Thailand ultimately did not accept any of the items requested, although neither the Defense Security Cooperation Agency's EDA database nor any open sources explains why. In 2012, out of the \$7 million-worth of used military equipment Thailand requested and was awarded, it accepted only \$5.9 million. Nevertheless, Thailand's acceptance of 84 percent of the 2012 EDA grants corresponds to not only increased purchase of U.S. military equipment, but also—since the United States authorized the grants—a stabilizing of Thailand-U.S. military relations after the 2006 coup.

Finally, U.S. EDA grants to Thailand during the years after the 2006 coup averaged \$4.1 million, compared to \$1.5 million during the Thaksin years. This \$4.1 million average accounts for the U.S. EDA allocations to Thailand in 2011 at \$10 million and in 2012 at \$7 million. Even though Thailand did not accept these two grants, the allocations represent U.S. intent and commitment to its partner. Despite this substantial increase in the average grant award in the post-2006 coup period, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency reported that no EDA grants were offered to Thailand for 2009 and 2013–14. In contrast, U.S. EDA grants to Thailand were made each year during the Thaksin Administration (2001–06), except for 2005, for which there is no available data. Similar to the ambiguity of *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations* report for EDA grants in 2005, available data on EDA grants (2008–18) from the Defense Security Cooperation Agency did not shed light as to why grants were not provided in some years.¹⁴²

Regarding U.S. FMF for Thailand, the lack of FMF in 2007 is a clear indicator that per U.S. law, FMF cannot be authorized for countries whose elected heads of government are deposed via coups.¹⁴³ U.S. FMF for Thailand during the Thaksin years averaged \$1.37 million, compared to \$1.31 million in the years after the 2006 coup. While the latter figure is slightly lower, Figure 5 indicates that FMF was more consistently provided in the

¹⁴² DSCA, "Excess Defense Articles."

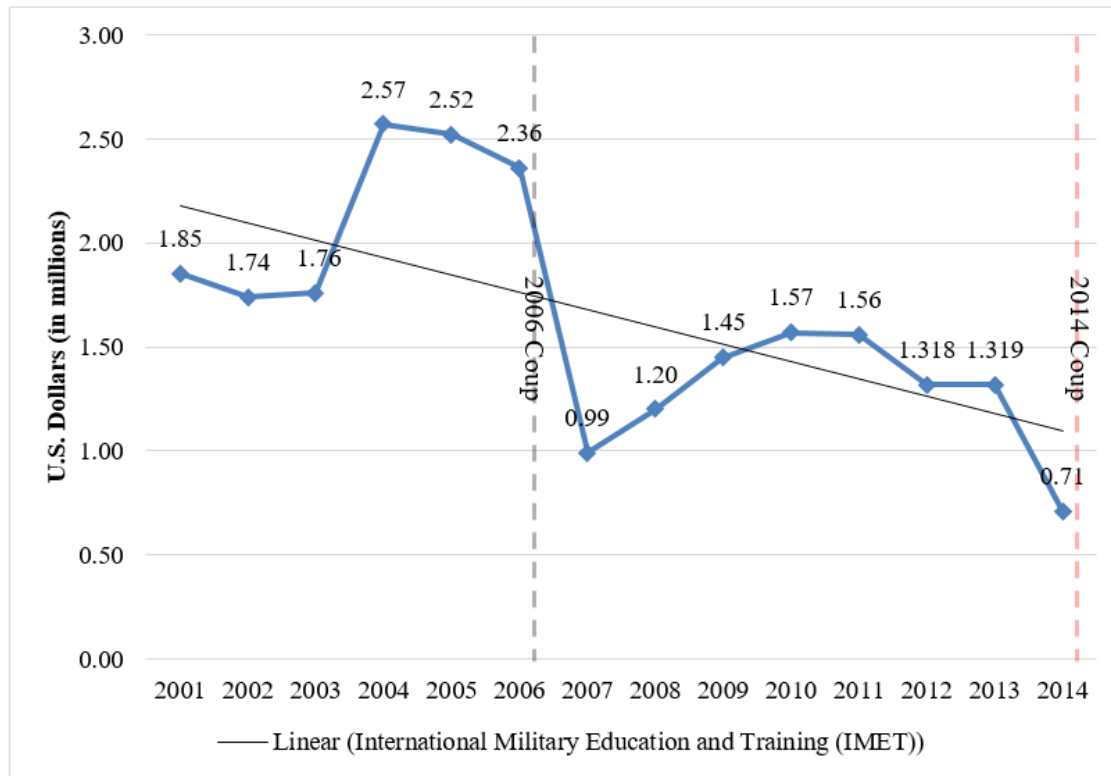
¹⁴³ Section 7008 of the H.R.2855, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act.

millions from 2007–14 compared to the sharp fluctuations seen from 2001–06. Lastly, U.S. FMS to Thailand during the years after the 2006 coup are lower, at an average of \$63,189 compared to \$132,433 during the Thaksin Administration. The increase in U.S. military sales to Thailand from 2001–06 is likely due to the Kingdom’s support of the U.S. global war on terrorism that necessitated increased military supplies.

3. International Military and Education Training

U.S. IMET funding was suspended in 2007 following the 2006 coup and, once restored, they remained at comparatively low levels in subsequent years and never reached those of the Thaksin era. Figure 6 compares U.S. funding to IMET from 2001–06 and 2007–14, again with vertical lines indicating the years of the two coups.

Figure 6. U.S. Financing to the IMET Program with Thailand after the 2006 Coup: 2007–2014¹⁴⁴



In response to the 2006 coup, the United States suspended IMET funding to Thailand for 2007 but restored it in 2008 once elections resumed in the Kingdom. Again, the lowered funding in 2008 was due to changes in allocations toward the International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement fund instead.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in the post-2006 period, U.S. funding to the IMET program with Thailand gradually increased from 2008 to 2011, from \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million. IMET funding decreased, however, from \$1.5 million in 2011 to \$1.3 million in 2012. This decline parallels a decrease in the United States’ total IMET budget for its foreign partners, from \$105.8 million in 2011 to \$103.3 million in 2012, following President Obama’s fiscal year 2012 budget-cut request that

¹⁴⁴ Security Assistance Monitor, Security Aid Pivot Table on International Military Education and Training.

¹⁴⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations for Fiscal Year 2008.”

affected IMET funding.¹⁴⁶ The following year, U.S. IMET funding to Thailand basically held steady.¹⁴⁷ The sharp decline in IMET funding in 2014 is due to the United States suspending approximately \$85,000 in IMET funds in response to the coup. In doing so, this action is indicative of the negative ramifications of Thailand's coup d'état on Thailand-U.S. military ties.

IMET funding in the Thaksin's years averaged \$2.1 million, compared to an average of \$1.2 million during the years between the 2006 and 2014 coups—a 42 percent drop. IMET funding during the Thaksin Administration began at \$1.85 million in 2001 and ended at \$2.36 million in 2005, a 28 percent increase, whereas IMET funding during the post-2006 years started at \$994,131 in 2007 and ended at \$713,000 in 2014, a 28 percent decrease. Without the 2014 coup, it is likely that IMET funding would have remained near the 2008–2013 average of \$1.4 million.

4. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Military Relations after the 2006 Coup

Thailand-U.S. military relations during the years between coups, from 2007 to 2014, saw two distinct trends: positively, the nature of COBRA GOLD expanded and U.S. FMS with Thailand increased, while negatively, U.S. funding for FMF and IMET were suspended. Even so, FMF and IMET funding was restored once Thailand became a democracy again as measured by holding elections between 2007 and 2014. In several ways, this speaks to the importance of Thailand-U.S. strategic cooperation in the overall bilateral relations given, too, that U.S. officials struggled to express disapproval toward Thailand's failing democracy after the 2006 coup d'état. In reality, Washington needed Bangkok's support in the global war on terrorism, and Thaksin was seen as eroding democracy from within, contributing to extreme social unrest. In sum, the years between the 2006 coup and 2014 coup signified a period of relatively stable Thailand-U.S. military

¹⁴⁶ Susan B. Epstein and Liana W. Rosen, *U.S. Security Assistance and Security Cooperation Programs: Overview of Funding Trends*, No. R45091, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2018), 31, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R45091.pdf>; Josh Rogin, "Obama Cuts Foreign Assistance to Several Countries in New Budget Request," *Foreign Policy*, February 14, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/14/obama-cuts-foreign-assistance-to-several-countries-in-new-budget-request/>.

¹⁴⁷ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*.

relations that started unraveling again in the areas of FMF and IMET funding following the 2014 coup.

C. THAILAND-U.S. MILITARY RELATIONS: AFTER THE 2014 COUP (2014–2019)

Thailand-U.S. military relations have declined significantly since Thailand's 2014 coup compared to the years prior to the 2006 coup and even between coups. In response to the May 22, 2014, coup, Kristie Kenney, former U.S. Ambassador to Thailand, cautioned:

A coup in Thailand will have a negative implication. There will be high-level review in Washington by the United States government of our assistance and our engagement with Thailand, especially the Thai military.¹⁴⁸

Thailand-U.S. military relations may appear to have improved dramatically but only if examining the COBRA GOLD exercise. Once the FMS, FMF, EDA, and IMET postures are considered, though, Thailand-U.S. military relations have declined in comparison to the state of their relations predating the 2014 coup. Several factors may be at play: the role of General Prayut as Thailand's unelected incumbent prime minister from May 2014 until March 2019, concerns about the military and the Prayut-supported constitution allowing a military appointed "super board" to oversee the government, the March 2019 elections that seated Prayut as PM, and lingering effects of the 2014 coup.¹⁴⁹

1. Exercise COBRA GOLD: 2014–2019

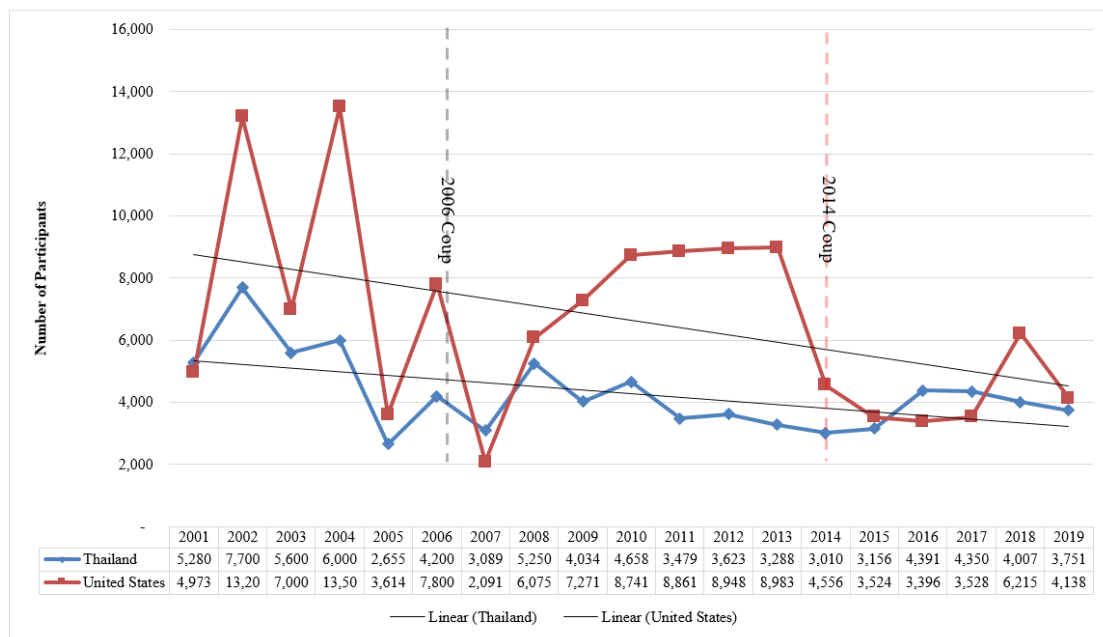
The 2014 coup affected COBRA GOLD 2015–19 in three distinct ways. First, COBRA GOLD 2015 was minimally affected in nature since the United States still conducted the exercise, but cancelled the large-scale, live-fire amphibious landing component and focused on humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, much as it did

¹⁴⁸ Steve Herman, "U.S. Urges Return to Democracy in Thailand," *VOA*, May 23, 2014, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/us-urges-return-democracy-thailand>.

¹⁴⁹ Panarat Thepgumpanat, "Concerns New Thai Constitution Will Stifle Democracy," *Reuters*, August 21, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-politics/concerns-new-thai-constitution-will-stifle-democracy-idUSKCN0QQ0QU20150821>; Richard C. Paddock, "Thailand Junta Leader Named Prime Minister After Contentious Vote," *New York Times*, June 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/05/world/asia/thailand-prayuth-prime-minister.html>.

immediately after the 2006 coup.¹⁵⁰ Second, COBRA GOLD 2015–17 saw low levels of U.S. military participation until the year-on-year 76 percent increase to 6,215 in 2018, although it decline to 4,138 in 2019 (see Figure 7). Third, while the numbers of participants were well below the post-2006 coup figures of 2007–14, the nature of the exercises—minus that of 2015—continued to evolve in complexity and interoperability.

Figure 7. Number of Participants in Exercise COBRA GOLD after the 2014 Coup: 2014–2019¹⁵¹



¹⁵⁰ Richard S. Ehrlich, “Obama Protests Thailand Coup, Scales Down Annual Cobra Gold Military Exercises,” *Washington Times*, February 9, 2015, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/feb/9/obama-protests-thailand-coup-scales-down-annual-co/>.

¹⁵¹ Oo and Moncrief, “Cobra Gold Goes North”; *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, “Adm. Fargo Touts Yearly Drill to Deal with Terror in Pacific: Exercise Cobra Gold Involves Singapore, America, and Thailand”; Boey, “SAF Joins U.S. and Thailand in Major War Games – Involving 13,000 Troops, the Joint Exercise Will Also Cover Counter-terrorism; 11 Countries Have Sent Observers to Thailand”; *Nation*, “Thailand: Optimism Over Cobra Gold”; *Agence France-Presse*, “Japan, in a First, to Join International War Games: Jane’s; Meelarp, “Sideline Democracy?: Explaining the United States’ Response to Thailand’s 2006 and 2014 Coups d’état,” 141; email message to JUSMAGTHAI, October 10, 2019; Royal Thai Army, email message to author, August 1, 2019.

As the above figure indicates, the U.S. 2014–19 figures are well below the post-2006 coup figures, especially the steady-state of approximately 8,750 realized for four solid years (2010–13), and never reached the high participant numbers of the Thaksin years (2001–06). However, the 2014–19 figures are similar to the post-006 coup period in that the number of participants from the United States and Thailand both trended downward as indicated by the two black trend lines. Although U.S. troop commitments were reduced by 50 percent in 2014 due to the U.S. Navy ship *Sgt Matej Kocak* running aground in Japan, the number of U.S. forces participating in COBRA GOLD did not rebound in 2015. While the 2014 decrease was unrelated to the coup, it tends to “hide” the real effect of the coup on 2015 U.S. participation figures. Rather, U.S. troop numbers dropped yet again, this time in response to the coup, and did not start to recover until 2018. Even then, the number of participants only reached half the 2010–13 level, and later dropped significantly again in 2019. In contrast to other years since 2001, the partners’ participant numbers were quite similar to one another from 2015–19. The number of U.S. troops participating in COBRA GOLD averaged 4,160 compared to Thailand’s 3,931. This is a 40 percent drop compared to the average U.S. forces participants of 6,940 for 2007–14, and a 50 percent drop compared to the U.S. average of 8,347 participants in 2001–06.

Thailand, on the other hand, began increasing its participation in 2015 after a downward trend between 2008–14, and its participant numbers grew significantly by 2016. Even so, the post-2014 coup, five-year average for Thailand is not much different than the post-2006 coup average. Comparing the number of Thailand participants in COBRA GOLD 2015–19 to COBRA GOLD 2007–14, the figures increased by just 3 percent, from an average of 3,803 during the post-2006 coup years to 3,931 during the Prayut years. However, comparing the average number of RTARF participating in COBRA GOLD from 2001–06 at 5,239 to the average during 2015–19, the number of participants declined by 25 percent, from 5,239 during the Thaksin Administration to 3,931 during the Prayut Administration. Nevertheless, the nature of the exercise from 2016 onward has only evolved in complexity to further enhance military readiness across all participating countries and military services.

In the wake of the 2014 coup, Washington cancelled the large-scale, live-fire amphibious landing portion of COBRA GOLD 2015. The rationale for this decision was reaffirmed on April 16, 2015, when USN Admiral Samuel J. Locklear testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that COBRA GOLD 2015 “was significantly limited in scope and scale in response to the Thai coup, and heavily focused on humanitarian assistance activities.”¹⁵² Furthermore, the live-fire, amphibious landing exercise component of COBRA GOLD 2015 was also cancelled.¹⁵³

As for COBRA GOLD 2016, despite initial concerns of cancellations, the exercise was held but also at a reduced scale on the U.S. side at 3,396 personnel but not on the RTARF side.¹⁵⁴ COBRA GOLD 2016 and 2017 were the only two iterations during the Prayut Administrative that brought higher RTARF participation and lower U.S. forces engagement—4,391 and 4,350 for the RTARF compared to 3,396 and 3,528 for the United States. This is arguably attributable to the lingering effects of the 2014 coup where U.S. policymakers decided to emphasize their condemnation of the coup through reduced participation. Moreover, COBRA GOLD 2016 was still modified in response to the 2014 coup by focusing on three primary events that are not combat-focused: a senior leader seminar, humanitarian civic assistance projects in local Thai communities, and a field training exercise aimed at strengthening regional relations.¹⁵⁵ COBRA GOLD 2017 also saw a minor decrease in the number of U.S. forces participating in the exercise, but the nature of the exercise was similar to that of COBRA GOLD 2016, which both included an amphibious assault landing demonstration and no combat component.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Statement of Admiral Samuel J. Locklear: Hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Pacific Command Posture, (2015), https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Locklear_04-16-15.pdf, 13.

¹⁵³ Ehrlich, “Obama Protests Thailand Coup, Scales Down Annual Cobra Gold Military Exercises.”

¹⁵⁴ Daniel Henderson et al., “Defense Update: U.S. Confirms Cobra Gold 2016,” US-ASEAN Business Council, Inc., June 21, 2015, <https://www.usasean.org/article/2015/06/21/defense-update-us-confirms-cobra-gold-2016>.

¹⁵⁵ Sam LaGrone, “Cobra Gold 2016 Starts with Lower U.S. Troop Totals, Emphasis on Non-Combat Missions,” *USNI News*, February 8, 2016, <https://news.usni.org/2016/02/08/cobra-gold-2016-starts-with-lower-u-s-troop-totals-emphasis-on-non-combat-missions>.

¹⁵⁶ “Exercise Cobra Gold 2017 to Begin February 14, 2017,” U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Thailand, accessed August 8, 2019, <https://th.usembassy.gov/exercise-cobra-gold-2017/>.

In an unforeseen turn of events, the United States in 2018 sent its largest number of COBRA GOLD participants since the 2014 coup, along with enhancing the nature of its operations.¹⁵⁷ COBRA GOLD 2018 marked the year where a standardized humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR), field training exercise (FTX), and command post exercise (CPX) segment were established. As for the upsurge in the number of U.S. forces participating in COBRA GOLD 2018, one possible explanation is President Donald J. Trump's tolerance of and even alleged affinity toward authoritarian leaders.¹⁵⁸ It may also may have been Washington's response to ongoing concerns of a rising China in this new era of great power competition.

At Thailand's urging, the United States and Thailand granted China full participatory status in COBRA GOLD 2015. Former COBRA GOLD Deputy Director, Major General Wittaya Wachirakul, had made a peculiar statement about China's first-ever role as a partial participant in COBRA GOLD 2014's HA/DR exercise, doing little to quell concerns about the Kingdom courting a major U.S. adversary.¹⁵⁹ When asked about the decision to include China as a participant, Wittaya disclosed that Beijing and Bangkok held talks in 2013 about the possibility of the former becoming a participant, which Wittaya stated "would be a good way to reduce tension...in the region."¹⁶⁰ His words created alarm in the U.S. government when coupled with reports of Thailand and China strengthening military ties.¹⁶¹ Thai policymakers' actions suggested that Bangkok was potentially distancing itself from Washington and cultivating stronger ties with Beijing. Yet, the

¹⁵⁷ Alexander C. Feldman, "President's Newsletter – February 2018," US-ASEAN Business Council, Inc., accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.usasean.org/presidents-newsletter/2018/02>.

¹⁵⁸ Joshua Kurlantzick, "Southeast Asia's Democratic Decline in the America First Era," Council on Foreign Relations, October 27, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/southeast-asias-democratic-decline-america-first-era>.

¹⁵⁹ Tan Hui Yee, "China Makes Modest Debut at Cobra Gold – But Still No Confirmation if it Will Be Full Participant," *Straits Times*, February 12, 2014, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/14BEB222D6EC60B0?p=AWNB>.

¹⁶⁰ Yee, "China Makes Modest Debut at Cobra Gold – But Still No Confirmation if it Will Be Full Participant," 1.

¹⁶¹ Wassana Nanuam and Patsara Jikkham, "Thailand, China Bolster Military Ties as U.S. Relations Splinter," *Bangkok Post*, February 6, 2015, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/468332/thailand-china-bolster-military-ties-as-us-relations-splinter>.

inclusion of China as a participant in future COBRA GOLD exercises continues with the exercise itself becoming what analysts refer to as a barometer of Thailand-U.S. military relations.¹⁶²

2. Foreign Military Financing, Foreign Military Sales, and Excess Defense Articles: 2014–2019

U.S. FMF to Thailand were estimated at \$1 million for 2014 and \$900,000 for 2015, but, since the 2014 coup, U.S. FMF to Thailand has stopped (see Figure 8).¹⁶³ Since then, no FMF funding to Thailand was recommended to Congress in accordance with U.S. law.¹⁶⁴ In contrast, the United States cut \$3.5 million in FMF to Thailand in 2007 following the 2006 coup, but restored it from 2008–14 when Thailand was under civilian control. U.S. FMS to Thailand continued relatively unaffected throughout the Prayut Administration, just as it had after the 2006 coup. Yet, U.S. EDA grants to Thailand stopped after 2015.¹⁶⁵

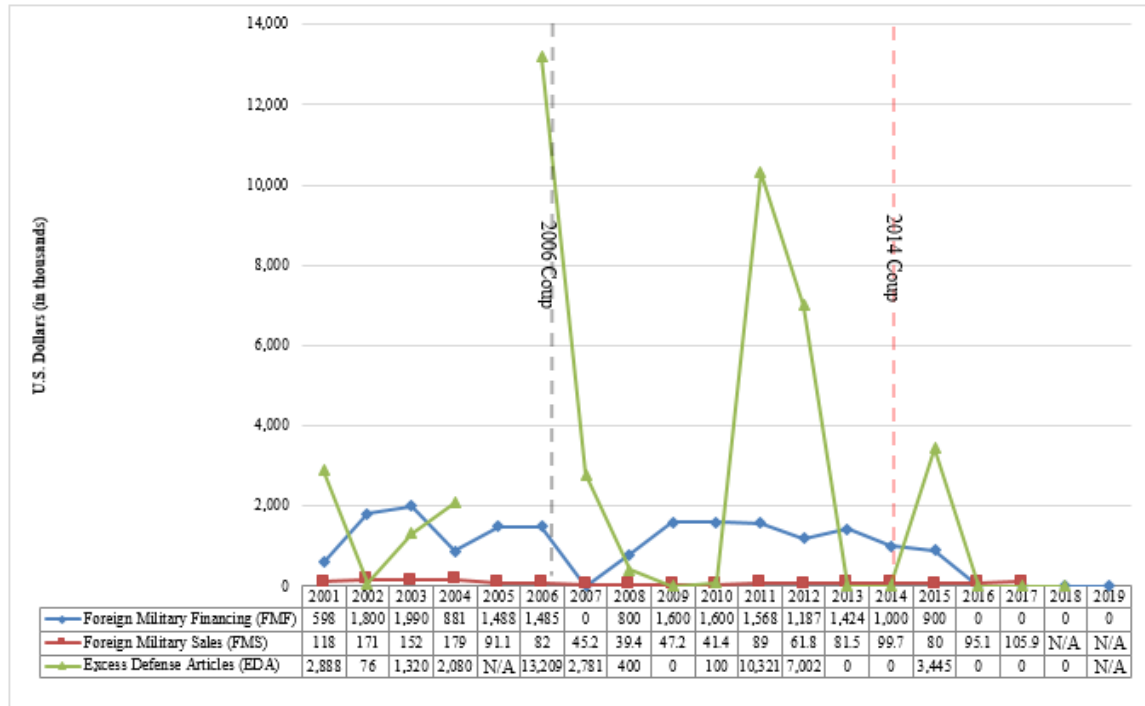
¹⁶² Storey, *Thailand's Post-Coup Relationships with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington*.

¹⁶³ U.S. Department of State, "Foreign Military Financing Account Summary."

¹⁶⁴ *Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill*, Senate, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., June 21, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/115th-congress/senate-report/282/1>; Section 7008 of the *H.R.2855, Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act*.

¹⁶⁵ Financial Policy and Analysis Business Operations, Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales and Other Security Cooperation Historical Facts as of September 30, 2017.

Figure 8. U.S. Security Assistance to Thailand after the 2014 Coup:
2014–2019¹⁶⁶



While the implications of the 2014 coup are evident in the suspension of U.S. FMF and EDA to Thailand, FMS continued to flow. The amounts of U.S. FMS with Thailand are relatively small, making it seem in Figure 8 that they held steady between 2007–19, yet there were some fluctuations. U.S. military equipment purchases increased somewhat from \$81,546 in 2013 to \$99,742 in the year of the coup. In 2015, they decreased back down to 2013 levels, at \$80,017, before rising above the coup-year level, to \$105,966 in 2017. The overall annual allocations of FMS between 2011 and 2017 were about double the amounts seen in 2007–2010. As for data on U.S. FMS with Thailand for 2018 and 2019, an unidentified Thai defense ministry source reported in August 2019 that the RTARF plans

¹⁶⁶ Security Assistance Monitor, Security Aid Pivot Table on Excess Defense Articles; Security Assistance Monitor, Security Aid Pivot Table on Foreign Military Financing; USAID, U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017; Financial Policy and Analysis Business Operations, *Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales And Other Security Cooperation Historical Facts As of September 30, 2017*; U.S. Department of State, “Foreign Military Financing Account Summary”; DSCA, database; accessed November 17, 2019.

to acquire 120 U.S. armored vehicles by 2020.¹⁶⁷ However, no confirming aggregate data is fully available or disclosed yet on Security Assistance Monitor, USAID, and Defense Security Cooperation Agency databases. Considering Wittaya's earlier remarks about cultivating Sino-Thai strategic cooperation, it stands to reason that Washington is authorizing FMS purchases with the aim that its Thai ally will continue to help strengthen U.S. security abroad.¹⁶⁸

3. International Military Education and Training

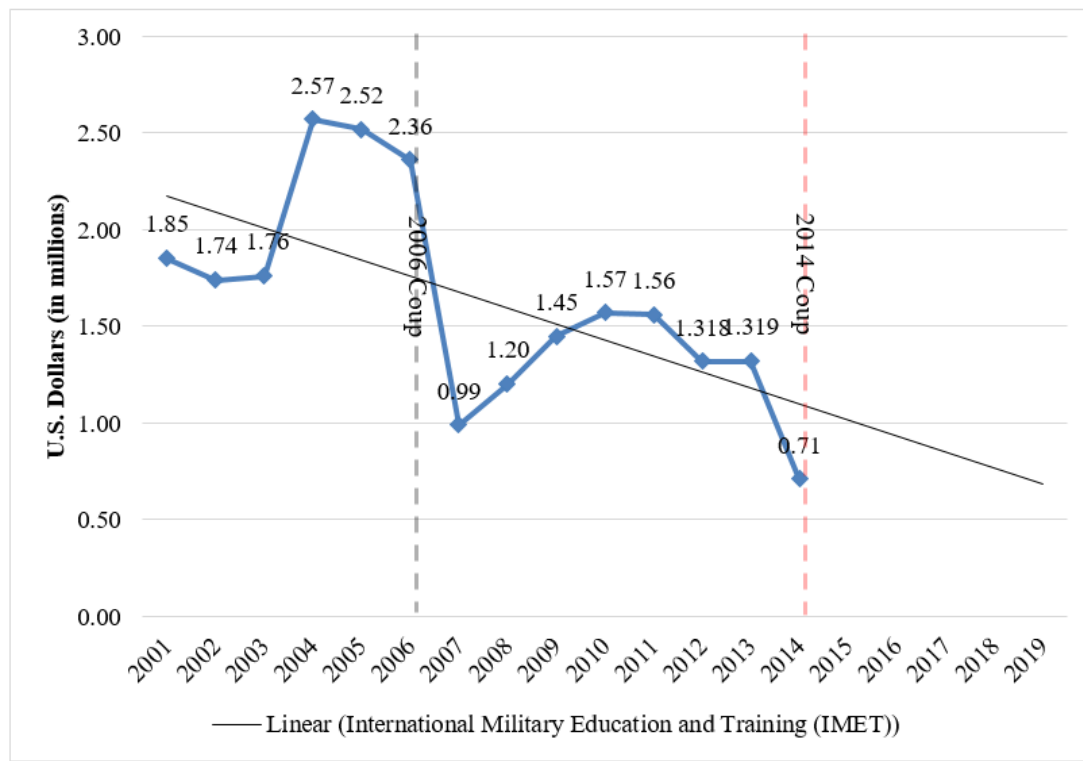
IMET funding ended following the 2014 coup, with the immediate U.S. suspension of \$85,000 in IMET economic assistance to Thailand, making this factor one of the components heavily damaged by the 2014 coup, similar to that of U.S. EDA grants, FMF, and a relatively small number of U.S. troops participating in COBRA GOLD from 2015–17.¹⁶⁹ Figure 9 illustrates not only the stark negative effects of Thailand's two 21st century coups, but also an overall downward trend for the past two decades.

¹⁶⁷ Panu Wongcha-um and Panarat Thepgumpanat, "Thailand to Acquire 120 U.S. Armored Vehicles," *Reuters*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-military/thailand-to-acquire-120-us-armored-vehicles-idUSKCN1VI11V>.

¹⁶⁸ DSCA, Foreign Military Sales.

¹⁶⁹ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*.

Figure 9. U.S. Financing to the IMET Program with Thailand after the 2014 Coup: 2014–2019¹⁷⁰



Since 2014, no U.S. funding exists to support education and training for members of the RTARF seeking to study at U.S. military institutions and affiliated schools. Considerations to restore IMET funding to Thailand were predicated on the outcome of the 2019 Thai democratic election, but since, Thailand has not been added into the FY20 IMET funding appropriation.¹⁷¹ This is cause for concern, since Sino-Thai strategic cooperation continues to grow, and more RTARF officers obtain military education in China than in the United States.¹⁷² Therefore, the absence of IMET funding to Thailand is a critical indicator of a decline in an important aspect of the Thailand-U.S. military relations.

¹⁷⁰ Security Assistance Monitor, Security Aid Pivot Table on International Military Education and Training.

¹⁷¹ S., Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill.

¹⁷² Storey, *Thailand's Post-Coup Relationships with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington*.

4. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Military Relations after the 2014 Coup

If considering only COBRA GOLD exercises and FMS, Thailand-U.S. military relations under the Prayut years (2014–2019) are moderately sustained. While U.S. COBRA GOLD participant numbers are well below pre-2014 levels, FMS figures are higher on average after the 2014 coup than they were in the period after the 2006 coup. However, if measured by FMF, EDA, and IMET funding, Thailand-U.S. military relations are in decline. Although the Prayut era commenced with major cuts to U.S. military aid to Thailand in FMF and IMET funding, the bilateral ties were nonetheless able to stabilize due to the enhanced nature of COBRA GOLD—both in terms of expanding to 29 observers by 2019 and new, qualitatively significant types of activities undertaken. These two developments may help Thailand and the U.S. ride out their relatively low numbers of troop commitments. Chief of Defense Forces of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, General Pornpipat Benyasri, said it well: “not only has Cobra Gold served as a platform for understanding and working together in the region, but has now become beneficial for our other strategic partners.”¹⁷³ However, unless FMF and IMET funding are restored to Thailand in the near future, Sino-Thai strategic cooperation may grow at the expense of Thailand-U.S. military ties.

D. CONCLUSION

Thailand-U.S. military relations from 2001 to 2019 have evolved and changed significantly and, arguably, may be weaker now than at the start of the 21st Century, but they appear still strongly valued and robust enough to be relied upon. COBRA GOLD is the most important and wide-reaching engagement of the partnership, relative to FMF, FMS, EDA grants, and IMET. The 2006 and 2014 coups affected COBRA GOLD, but largely in the reduction of U.S. troops temporarily contracting in response to the coups and the cancellation of combat component exercises. Over two decades, both countries saw a decline in the number of personnel they devoted to this foundational exercise. Nonetheless, from 2001 to 2019, the total number of RTARF participating in COBRA GOLD stood at

¹⁷³ Mary Rose Mittlesteadt, “Cobra Gold 19: Opening Ceremony,” *U.S. Army*, February 12, 2019, https://www.army.mil/article/217329/cobra_gold_19_opening_ceremony, 1.

81,521, while the number of U.S. forces totaled 126,414. Throughout this period, RTARF averaged 4,290 and U.S. forces averaged 6,653 per year. These are solid indicators of the strategic importance Thailand and the United States still place on COBRA GOLD.

Correspondingly, despite the significantly lower troop contributions on both sides for COBRA GOLD 2019, compared to the number of participants in preceding years, the nature of the exercise continued to expand in complexity since 2001. Each COBRA GOLD iteration has gradually evolved to include more international participants and observers, along with expansions in the types of engagements to include senior staff seminars, leadership training, humanitarian civic assistance projects, and tabletop exercises. Currently, the exercise remains the pride of Thailand's and the United States' forces and a defining marker of the Thailand-U.S. military alliance, with each party claiming it to be the largest and most comprehensive exercise of its kind.

U.S. military aid to Thailand during the Thaksin years steadily increased and projected an optimistic view of the alliance—until the 2006 coup hit. U.S. FMF to Thailand was negatively affected by the coups, especially the latter one. FMF to Thailand peaked during the Thaksin years, averaging \$1.37 million, and basically held steady during the years between the coups at \$1.31 million. Although the estimated FMF to Thailand was set at \$900,000 for 2014–15, there remains no confirmed actual amount reported on open source and military databases. U.S. FMF remains suspended following the May 22, 2014, coup without any indication of possible reinstatement.¹⁷⁴

Comparatively, U.S. FMS to Thailand persisted from 2001 to 2019 despite varying degrees of fluctuations. FMS during the Thaksin years steadily increased from \$118,543 in 2001 to \$179,776 in 2004—with a slight drop from \$170,598 in 2002 to \$152,435 in 2003—before tapering off to \$91,182 in 2005 and \$82,066 in 2006.¹⁷⁵ These numbers indicate stability in U.S. FMS to Thailand with no sharp declines or increases that persist to date. In fact, FMS amounts between the 2006 and 2014 coups did not reach the high

¹⁷⁴ “Response to the Coup in Thailand,” U.S. Office of the Spokesperson, May 28, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/05/226620.htm>.

¹⁷⁵ Financial Policy and Analysis Business Operations, Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales and Other Security Cooperation Historical Facts as of September 30, 2017.

figures noted during the Thaksin Administration. While the trends were stable from 2007–2014, the period’s annual average was \$63,125, more than half the 2001–06 average of \$132,433. U.S. FMS to Thailand from 2007 to 2010 averaged \$43,329 before peaking at \$89,093 in 2011. This timely increase of FMS to Thailand arguably reflected the United States’ support of its ally’s democratic elections. Finally, U.S. FMS values to Thailand rose to an average of \$93,667 per year during the Prayut Administration. This increase is likely attributable to the value Washington and Thailand place on interoperability, especially in light of Thailand’s recent military overtures toward China.¹⁷⁶

Finally, U.S. IMET funding to Thailand was significantly affected by the 2006 and 2014 coups. During the Thaksin years (2001–06), IMET funding averaged \$2.1 million and declined to \$1.2 million in the interim years (2007–14). In the wake of the 2014 coup, the U.S. government suspended \$85,000 of unspent funding for FY 2014 and cancelled all IMET and FMF-funded courses for Thailand with no further ones planned.¹⁷⁷ This suspension remains in-place, thus, highlighting the negative ramifications of the 2014 coup on U.S. IMET funding to Thailand, which is similarly reflected in suspensions of U.S. EDA grants to Thailand per reporting from 2008 to 2018. Thus, Thailand-U.S. military relations arguably remain damaged as a result of the grants’ cessation after 2015.¹⁷⁸ This lack of funding, too, underscores the ramifications of the 2006 and 2014 coups on U.S. economic assistance to strengthening Thailand’s military and interoperability.

¹⁷⁶ DSCA, Foreign Military Sales.

¹⁷⁷ U.S. Office of the Spokesperson, “Response to the Coup in Thailand.”

¹⁷⁸ Financial Policy and Analysis Business Operations, Foreign Military Sales, Foreign Military Construction Sales and Other Security Cooperation Historical Facts as of September 30, 2017.

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III. THAILAND-U.S. ECONOMIC RELATIONS

In examining Thailand-U.S. economic relations to gauge the overall Thailand-U.S. relationship, this chapter finds that the two countries' economic ties have been unexpectedly stable for the past two decades. In fact, their economic ties continued with significant vitality and actually improved since—and in spite of—the 2006 and 2014 coups. This is surprising given Thailand's coups and social and political instabilities, including multiple Thai prime ministers leading the country between 2001 and 2019. Periods of decline were largely attributable to factors other than the coup, such as the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis and Thailand's poor economic reform policies.

This chapter is organized, as was the previous one, into three periods: The Thaksin administration from 2001–06, post-2006 coup from 2007–2014, and post-2014 coup to present. In addition, to establish a more robust baseline, it briefly describes the robust economic decades prior to the Asian Financial Crisis. On balance, economic relations—as assessed through bilateral trade, U.S. foreign direct investment (FDI) to Thailand, and development assistance—strengthened during the Thaksin administration from 2001 to 2006. The years after the 2006 coup marked a pivot point where total Thailand-U.S. bilateral trade and U.S. FDI to Thailand increased, while U.S. development assistance to Thailand stopped entirely by 2014. Since the mid-2014 coup, total bilateral trade has continued to increase, while the U.S. trade deficit with Thailand continues to grow. U.S. FDI and development assistance were marginally less after the 2014 coup.

A. THAILAND-U.S. ECONOMIC RELATIONS: THE THAKSIN YEARS (2001–2006)

Thailand-U.S. economic relations under Thaksin were quite strong. Total trade increased an impressive 47 percent, FDI into Thailand from the U.S. decreased 46 percent but averaged \$725 million in Thaksin's last three years in office (2004–2006), and

economic development aid averaged a sizeable \$1.9 million.¹⁷⁹ These figures are impressive when taking into account concerns about Thaksin channeling Mahathir's prioritization of the East over the West, which Thaksin revealed in his "New Asian Realism" speech at the East Asia Economic Summit in 2002:

We are learning that the twin calamities of the 1997 Financial Crisis and the events of 9/11 are choking the two main growth engines of the world, the United States and Japan, in such a way that they may not be able to restart their engines over the short term.... Isn't it time for Asia to explore the setting up of an Asian Bond market as a financial instrument to help in maximizing our continent's potential and prevent exploitation of our reserves by others against the interests of ourselves?¹⁸⁰

Critics were concerned that Thaksin's administration would adopt policies that stood to hamper Thailand-U.S. economic relations given his call for Asian states to strategically and economically rely on one other, not the West.¹⁸¹

Thailand-U.S. economic relations did not stagnate or contract during his administration, however, since it would have been impractical to curtail economic ties with a treaty ally that is also one of Thailand's largest trading partners. In fact, during Thaksin's meeting with President Bush on December 14, 2001, the two endorsed the Framework for Economic Cooperation signed by Secretary of State Colin Powell and Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs Surakiart Sathirathai.¹⁸² The Framework envisioned the two countries strengthening their economic partnership to contribute to regional peace and prosperity by

¹⁷⁹ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019), <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5490.html#2000>; "U.S. Direct Investment Abroad: Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data," U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://www.bea.gov/international/di1usdbal>; "U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017" (U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); accessed June 14, 2019), <https://explorer.usaid.gov/reports>.

¹⁸⁰ "Asia Cooperation Dialogue – the New Asian Realism Keynote Address by His Excellency Thaksin Shinawatra Prime Minister of Thailand at the East Asia Economic Summit 2002 Kuala Lumpur," ASEAN, October 6, 2002, https://asean.org/?static_post=asia-cooperation-dialogue-the-new-asian-realism-keynote-address-by-his-excellency-thaksin-shinawatra-prime-minister-of-thailand-at-the-east-asia-economic-summit-2002-kuala-lumpur-6-october-2002.

¹⁸¹ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*; McCargo and Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of a Thailand*.

¹⁸² "Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Thailand," Yale Law School: The Avalon Project, accessed June 15, 2019, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/joint_011.asp.

enhancing trade, reducing trade barriers through multilateral forums such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), encouraging FDI, and respecting intellectual property rights through protection laws, among other issues. Also during their 2001 diplomatic visit, Bush announced that the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) would open a regional office in Thailand in January 2002 to support priority infrastructure project development and financing in the Kingdom and the Southeast Asian region.¹⁸³

Subsequent meetings between Thaksin and Bush included similar remarks and actions promoting and institutionalizing strong bilateral economic relations. In October 2002, the two leaders signed the 2002 Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, which prescribes that the two countries engage regularly to discuss trade and investment related to the APEC and ASEAN agendas, intellectual property rights and customs issues, and the WTO Doha negotiations.¹⁸⁴ The following year at the 2003 APEC meeting in Bangkok, Bush announced his intention of negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Thailand under the Enterprise for ASEAN Initiative. In 2005, the two leaders declared that they would make vigorous efforts to reach a consensus on the FTA talks by 2006.¹⁸⁵ Considering these transformative events, economic ties were expected to expand and deepen.

Optimism was partially influenced and justified by Thailand's exceptionally strong economic growth in the decades prior to the Asian Financial Crisis, with the United States

¹⁸³ "U.S.-Thailand Joint Statement," White House, December 14, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011214-7.html>.

¹⁸⁴ "Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Thailand," U.S. Department of State, June 11, 2003, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/ot/21627.htm>; "TIFA Agreement," Royal Thai Embassy in Washington, D.C., accessed June 15, 2019, <http://thaiembdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Agreement-US-Thailand-TIFA.pdf>; "United States-Thailand," Foreign Trade Information System, accessed September 4, 2019, http://www.sice.oas.org/TPD/USA_THA/USA_THA_e.ASP.

¹⁸⁵ "Fact Sheet on Free Trade and Thailand," White House, October 20, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/10/20031020-27.html>; "Joint Statement Between President Bush and Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra," U.S. State Department, September 19, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2005/53750.htm>; Foreign Trade Information System, "United States-Thailand."

and Japan both playing significant roles.¹⁸⁶ By the 1980s, Thailand was a global development success story, with annual GDP from the 1960s to the 1980s increasing on average by 7.8 percent per year.¹⁸⁷ Thailand was second only to South Korea in terms of highest sustained GDP growth for a developing country at the time. This impressive growth stemmed from Thailand's economic reforms, particularly in the agricultural sector, which the government taxed to support industrial growth until the mid-1980s.¹⁸⁸ The UN Food and Agriculture Organization reports that Thailand's agricultural GDP also grew annually during this period at 4 to 5 percent, with land and labor being the main resources fueling the growth. From 1987–1995, Thailand had the fastest growing economy in the world with an unprecedented average real GDP growth of 10.4 percent.¹⁸⁹ Inflation, moreover, averaged a low of 5.3 percent. Combined, Thailand's high GDP and low inflation generated high exports of labor-intensive manufactured goods with similar increased in foreign capital inflows to include FDI. Despite the Asian Financial Crisis in the late '90s, then, it was understandable that President Bush wanted to negotiate an FTA, especially one that included eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers on agricultural goods to increase U.S. exports to Thailand.¹⁹⁰ But, again, although FTA negotiations ended because of the 2006 coup and have yet to be reassumed, Thailand-U.S. economic relations under the Thaksin years fared quite well.

1. Thailand-U.S. Total Bilateral Trade: 2001–2006

Thailand-U.S. total bilateral trade was the hallmark of the two countries' economic ties during the Thaksin years, given that total trade increased by an astonishing 47

¹⁸⁶ Karl Jackson, *Asian Contagion: The Causes and Consequences of a Financial Crisis* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

¹⁸⁷ Asian Development Bank, *Thailand: Industrialization and Economic Catch-up*, No. RPT157810-2 (Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2015), 77, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/178077/tha-industrialization-econ-catch.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ Policy Assistance Series, *Rapid Growth of Selected Asian Economies: Lessons and Implications for Agriculture and Food Security* (Bangkok, Thailand: FAO, 2006), <http://www.fao.org/3/ag087e/AG087E06.htm>.

¹⁸⁹ Peter G. Warr, "The Thai Economy: From Boom to Gloom?" *Southeast Asian Affairs* (1997): 317–33, www.jstor.org/stable/27912185.

¹⁹⁰ White House, "Fact Sheet on Free Trade and Thailand."

percent.¹⁹¹ This trade was essential to aiding Thailand's post-Crisis economic recovery and eventually elevating it from a mid-tiered income bracket into a higher, more lucrative-income bracket that would attract even more foreign investment and trade. The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997–98 devastated the Thai economy and led to the Thai baht falling from a long-fixed \$1USD for 25 baht in June 1997 to \$1USD for 54 baht in January 1998.¹⁹² In order to get out of its recession, Thailand needed to rebuild and reshape its economy.

In the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis, Thailand sought foreign assistance to repair and grow its economy. In addition to receiving a \$17-billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in 1997, as well as agreeing to other economic recovery measures, Thailand emphasized trade with the United States.¹⁹³ In 2000, Thailand-U.S. total trade measured approximately \$23 billion.¹⁹⁴ After Thaksin was elected, Thailand-U.S. trade grew from \$20.7 billion in 2001 to approximately \$30.4 billion in 2006. This strong, steady growth in bilateral trade was possible because of the combination of domestic reforms and Thaksin's efforts and agreed-upon policies with other state leaders, such as President Bush, which paved the way for economic revival in Thailand.¹⁹⁵

Data on Thailand-U.S. total bilateral trade during the Thaksin years are illustrated in Figure 10.¹⁹⁶ Figure 10 represents the total imports and exports between Thailand and the United States from 2001 to 2006, including the remaining months of 2006 after Thaksin

¹⁹¹ This thesis analyzes Thailand-U.S. total trade in goods only and does not include services. However, data on U.S. FDI in Thailand include goods and services. U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

¹⁹² Jonathan E. Leightner, "Thailand's Financial Crisis: Its Causes, Consequences, and Implications," *Journal of Economic Issues* 41, no. 1 (March 2007): 61–76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25511156>.

¹⁹³ Such loans would have needed the backing of the United States. Leightner, "Thailand's Financial Crisis: Its Causes, Consequences, and Implications," 64.

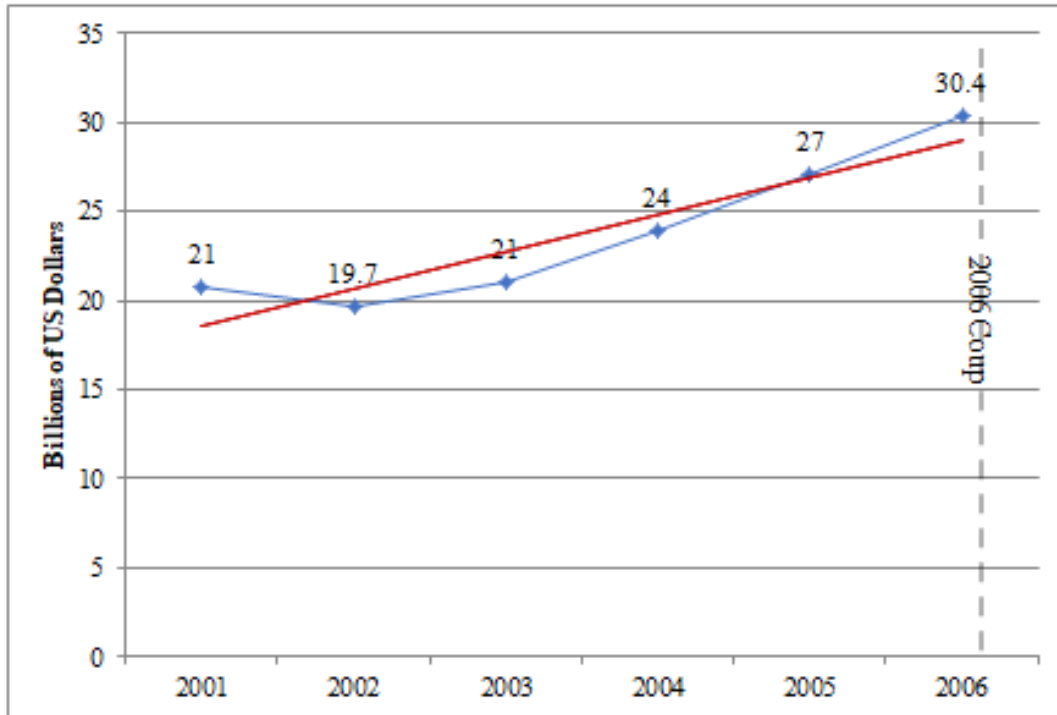
¹⁹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

¹⁹⁵ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

was ousted from government on September 19, 2006. The dashed vertical line indicates Thailand's 2006 coup and the red line represents the vertical trend.

Figure 10. Thailand-U.S. Total Bilateral Trade under the Thaksin Administration (2001–2006).¹⁹⁷



This data warrants three important observations. First, the slight trade decline from \$20.7 billion in 2001 to \$19.7 billion in 2002 was not due to Thaksin's policies or actions, but, rather, to an exogenous 2001 global downturn in world trade and output expansion.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, this global slowdown led to a decline in Thailand's overall exports by 7.1

¹⁹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019). While data obtained from the Observatory of Economic Complexity and the Ministry of Commerce in Thailand were not significantly different from those at the U.S. Census Bureau, data from the bureau proved more consistent.

¹⁹⁸ For more information on the 2001 global slowdown, which some analysts argue as a small recession, see: "World Trade Developments in 2001 and Prospects for 2002," World Trade Organization, accessed September 3, 2019, https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/its2002_e/chp_0_e.pdf.

percent and affected Thailand's exports to the United States, as well.¹⁹⁹ Second, once world trade regained momentum and increased by 4.4 percent in 2002, Thailand's exports grew, too.²⁰⁰ Growth in Thailand-U.S. total trade continued steadily, increasing by an impressive 54.3 percent from \$19.7 billion in 2002 to \$30.4 in 2006. Lastly, the increase in Thailand-U.S. total trade had one accompanying downfall, which was an increased trade deficit with Thailand.²⁰¹ From 2001 to 2006, the U.S. trade deficit with Thailand increased by 66.5 percent, from -\$8.7 billion in 2001 to -\$14.5 billion in 2006.²⁰² This deficit is salient in comparison to Thailand's economic relations with China, the United States' current adversary in this contemporary great power competition and Thailand's current major trading partner. In the same period, Thailand's trade deficit with China rose by 116 percent, from -\$853,107.38 in 2001 to -\$1,842,995.72 in 2006—considerably greater than that of the U.S. trade deficit with Thailand.²⁰³

While Thaksin courted the United States' and its economy, he also adopted policies to enhance Sino-Thai trade relations. Thaksin saw China as a counterweight to the United States well before his election, and he later made China a central force in how he ran his foreign policy.²⁰⁴ After taking office in February 2001, Thaksin almost immediately proposed an FTA with China, in April 2001, and was quick to pay a diplomatic visit to former Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji in August 2001.²⁰⁵ Compared to the United States, Thaksin did not seek an FTA until two years after assuming office and did not visit Bush

¹⁹⁹ Bhanupong Nidhiprabha, "The Rise and Fall of Thailand's Export-Oriented Industries," *Asian Economic Papers* 16, no. 3 (2017): 128–50, https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/asep_a_00556.

²⁰⁰ Nidhiprabha, "The Rise and Fall of Thailand's Export-Oriented Industries," 128.

²⁰¹ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

²⁰² U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

²⁰³ "Thailand Exports, Imports and Trade Balance" (World Integrated Trade Solution; accessed September 3, 2019), <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/THA/Year/2006/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>.

²⁰⁴ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

²⁰⁵ "The China-Thailand Joint Communiqué," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, August 29, 2001, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/yzs_663350/gjlb_663354/2787_663568/2788_663570/t16220.shtml.

until after September 11, 2001. Importantly, a Sino-Thai FTA was successfully executed in 2003, while the Thailand-U.S. FTA efforts were aborted after the 2006 coup.

Sino-Thai trade relations were emphasized under Thaksin's government. During Thaksin's visit with Zhu Rongji, the two leaders signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Establishing a Bilateral Business Council between the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade and the Board of Trade of Thailand and spoke highly of their trade relations. The leaders concurred Sino-Thai economic and trade cooperation had become "an increasingly powerful engine driving China-Thailand relations" and, therefore, both sought to strengthen cultural and trade ties through increased sister-city relations between their two countries.²⁰⁶ This driving engine is evident in succeeding Sino-Thai diplomatic meetings where both states spoke frequently of deepening their economic relationships.²⁰⁷

Additionally, in April 2003, not only did Premier Wen Jiabao make Thailand his first overseas visit upon assuming office, he and Thaksin agreed to develop their trade relations further by eliminating tariffs on vegetables and fruit products.²⁰⁸ The two leaders signed an agreement to accelerate tariff elimination under the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and the ASEAN Early Harvest Program, which was enacted in October 2003. Essentially, this was the FTA that Thaksin pursued with Zhu Rongji back in 2001, which subsequently led to greater Sino-Thai trade relations and continues to serve both states today. When the agreement went into effect, it

²⁰⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The China-Thailand Joint Communiqué."

²⁰⁷ A systemic and vigorous search of U.S., Thai, and Chinese site domains and webpages reveal more Sino-Thai diplomatic exchanges than the four shared between Thailand and the United States (2001, 2003, and two in 2005).

²⁰⁸ Agreement between the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand on Accelerated Tariff Elimination under the Early Harvest Programmed of the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation between China and ASEAN (2003), "Free Trade Agreement," Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China, accessed September 3, 2019, http://fta.mofcom.gov.cn/dongmeng_phase2/annex/Ching-Thailand_zqshjh-qxgsxy_en.pdf.

eliminated duties on 188 fruits and vegetables.²⁰⁹ Thailand also gained a \$200 million agricultural trade surplus with China from October 2003 through February 2005.

Once China entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2002, Sino-Thai total trade grew by 23.4 percent from a partner share of 10.41 percent in 2001 to 12.85 percent in 2002.²¹⁰ Sino-Thai total trade continued growing at stunning rates to where Thailand's export growth to China in 2003 increased by 60 percent from \$3.5 million in 2002 to \$5.7 million in 2003.²¹¹ Finally, China overtook the United States as Thailand's largest import country in 2004 and as Thailand's largest export destination in 2010.²¹² In the latter case, China not only surpassed the United States but also Japan to become the major destination for Thai exports goods. This increase in Thai-Sino economic ties will be exceptionally significant in succeeding chapters where Thai-Sino trade relations continue their upward trajectory. Nonetheless, Thailand-U.S. bilateral trade in the Thaksin period was still strong and indicated deepening ties.

2. U.S. Foreign Direct Investment in Thailand: 2001–2006

During Thaksin's reign, FDI from the United States increased by 73 percent, from \$6.1 billion in 2001 to \$10.6 billion in 2006, although there were slight declines in FDI in 2003 and 2004. Figure 11 depicts U.S. investment in Thailand on an uptick from \$6.1 billion in 2001 to \$7.7 billion in 2002 before decreasing by 11.7 percent to \$6.8 billion in 2003. U.S. FDI rebounded 8.8 percent the following years to \$7.4 billion, surged 37 percent to \$10.2 billion in 2005, and modestly grew 3.9 percent to 10.6 billion in 2006.²¹³ The

²⁰⁹ "Thailand's Free Trade Agreements," Board of Investment of Thailand, June 16, 2016, https://www.boi.go.th/tir/issue/200507_17_6/17.htm.

²¹⁰ "Thailand Exports, Imports and Trade Balance" (World Integrated Trade Solution; accessed September 3, 2019).

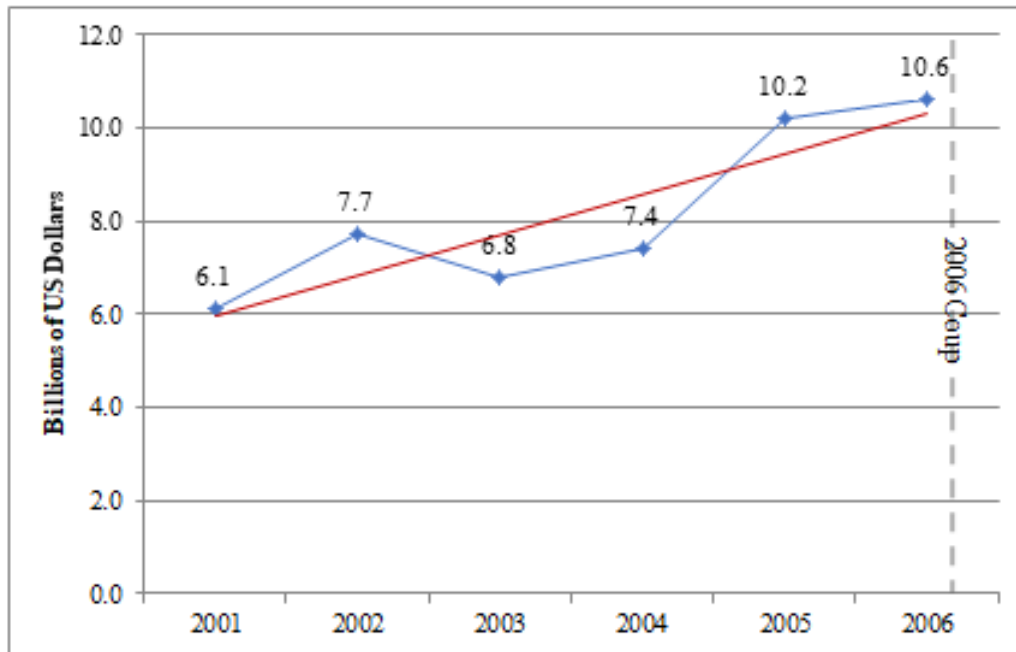
²¹¹ Sompop Manarungsan, *Thailand-China Cooperation in Trade, Investment and Official Development Assistance* (Japan: Bangkok Research Center, 2009), http://www.ide.go.jp/library/English/Publish/Download/Brc/pdf/01_thailandandchina.pdf; "Thailand Exports, Imports and Trade Balance" (World Integrated Trade Solution; accessed September 3, 2019).

²¹² "Thailand Exports, Imports and Trade Balance" (World Integrated Trade Solution; accessed September 3, 2019).

²¹³ For information on the included industries, see "Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data," U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (USBEA), accessed November 26, 2019, <https://apps.bea.gov/iTable/iTable.cfm?isuri=1&reqid=2&step=1#isuri=1&reqid=2&step=1>.

dotted vertical line represents the 2006 coup and the slanted red line depicts the vertical trend of U.S. FDI to Thailand.

Figure 11. U.S. Foreign Direct Investment under the Thaksin Administration (2001–2006).²¹⁴



The starting increase in FDI is within normal ranges for long-term trade partners and is also in response to Thailand’s double-digit export growth during the early 2000s.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Data shows U.S. direct investment position abroad on a historical-cost basis to all industries in Thailand. Also, the USBEA reports two different datasets on the amount of U.S. FDI to Thailand: one on excel and one online through its interactive visualization. After comparing the numbers from USBEA’s two different databases to other economic databases, it is determined that the interactive visualization database reports similar data to that of the U.S. Trade Representative and was, thus, selected over that of the excel data, which reported high monetary fluctuations. Moreover, data on U.S. FDI to Thailand from The Ministry of Commerce of the Kingdom of Thailand, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) databases were initially considered for analysis and were slightly similar with one another. The USBEA data, however, is the most consistent and readily available for all years considered (2001–2019). USBEA, “Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data.”

²¹⁵ Raymond J. Ahearn and Wayne M. Morrison, *U.S.- Thailand Free Trade Agreement Negotiations*, No. RL32314 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2004), 29, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20040401_RL32314_67c711ca9b231ace3538fba479d9e28ac13e76d8.pdf.

During the time, FDI outflow to Thailand's export-oriented industries aimed to support its growth.²¹⁶ This is important from Thailand's perspective since FDI remains a crucial source of employment and avenue for new technological developments and processes in Thailand.²¹⁷ In 2003, however, global FDI remained low at \$653 billion with FDI flows to the Asia-Pacific region increasing only marginally to \$99 billion in 2003 compared to \$95 billion in 2002.²¹⁸ U.S. FDI to Thailand, specifically, decreased by 11.7 percent due to the United States diverting its investment to other countries such as China, whose economic reforms in 2003 gave rise to increased GDP attracting foreign investors.²¹⁹ Prior to the decline, investment to Thailand's labor-intensive products did not need to compete with China's since China had yet to join the WTO.²²⁰ It was only after China joined the WTO in 2002 that U.S. FDI to Thailand gradually diverted to China the succeeding year. Furthermore, for instance, once the United States and Vietnam signed a bilateral trade agreement (BTA) in 2000, and after U.S. Congress approved it in 2001, U.S. firms became the sole largest source of FDI in Vietnam.²²¹ From 2002 to 2004, U.S. FDI in Vietnam increased an average 27 percent annually compared to approximately 3 percent annually from 1996 to 2001.²²² Thus, U.S. FDI to Thailand was similarly diverted to Vietnam as it was to China.

While U.S. FDI to China and Vietnam were high, U.S. FDI to Thailand also rebounded to \$7.4 billion in 2004 and increased to \$10.2 billion in 2005 and \$10.6 billion in 2006. This increase is likely attributable to foreign investors speculating that President Bush's October 2003 proposal of a FTA with Thailand would come to fruition and benefit

²¹⁶ Nidhiprabha, "The Rise and Fall of Thailand's Export-Oriented Industries," 128-50.

²¹⁷ Ahearn and Morrison, *U.S.- Thailand Free Trade Agreement Negotiations*.

²¹⁸ "Global FDI Decline Bottoms Out in 2003," United Nations, January 12, 2004, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2004/tad1969.doc.htm>.

²¹⁹ Ahearn and Morrison, *U.S.- Thailand Free Trade Agreement Negotiations*; Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth, Second Edition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

²²⁰ Nidhiprabha, "The Rise and Fall of Thailand's Export-Oriented Industries," 130.

²²¹ Mark E. Manyin, *U.S.-Vietnam Relations: Background and Issues for Congress*, No. RL33316, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2006), 26, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20060630_RL33316_8d8da96ed78bd309dd531dec792233edf1e9318a.pdf.

²²² Economist Intelligence Unit, *Vietnam Country Report*, April 2006.

U.S. companies in Thailand.²²³ Foreign investors' confidence of investing in Thailand's economic growth and reaping the profits of the Kingdom's announced plans to reform and privatize state-owned companies further increased FDI to Thailand.²²⁴ By 2004, U.S.-invested firms in Thailand became major employers of over 200,000 Thai nationals, and the United States was the largest foreign direct investor in Thailand, second only to Japan.²²⁵ Comparatively, China's FDI in Thailand fell in 2001 and 2004 but increased toward the end of 2006.²²⁶

3. U.S. Development Assistance to Projects in Thailand: 2001–2006

Annual levels of U.S. development assistance to Thailand from 2001 to 2006 as depicted in Figure 12 have fluctuated dramatically, but remained relatively high. Historically, U.S. development assistance to Thailand has been robust, dating back to the Cold War era. When Thailand was a low-income country, it was eligible for funding through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) but graduated from USAID assistance in 1995 and USAID closed its bilateral mission in Thailand the following year.²²⁷ Even so, the United States continued providing development assistance to Thailand commencing again, in 1998, for infrastructure development through the USAID.²²⁸ USAID later returned to Bangkok in 2003 to open a regional mission serving Asia and providing funding, but, as Figure 12 illustrates, this funding is inconsistent.²²⁹

²²³ “Thai-U.S. Free Trade: Outlook good ... mostly,” *Nation*, September 18, 2003, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/resources/doc/nb/news/0FDA62B25E5A89E1?p=AWNB>.

²²⁴ United Nations, “Global FDI Decline Bottoms Out in 2003”; Ahearn and Morrison, *U.S.- Thailand Free Trade Agreement Negotiations*.

²²⁵ Ahearn and Morrison, *U.S.- Thailand Free Trade Agreement Negotiations*.

²²⁶ Neither the Bank of Thailand nor UNCTAD reported China's rank vis-à-vis the United States and Japan in terms of FDI to Thailand. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (Bilateral FDI Statistics; accessed June 15, 2019), <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/FDI%20Statistics/FDI-Statistics-Bilateral.aspx>.

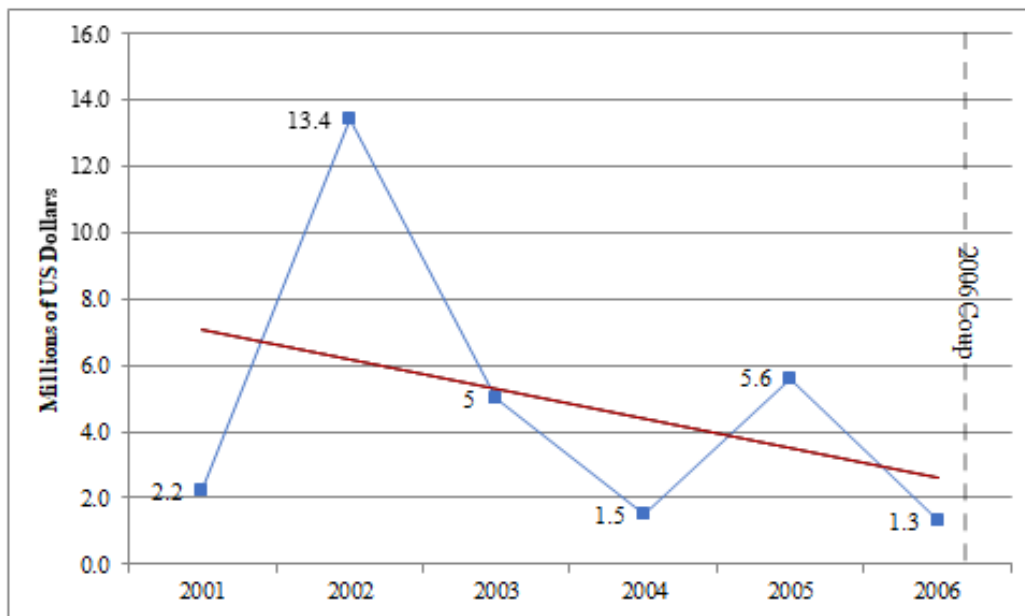
²²⁷ “Thailand Country Profile,” USAID, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1861/thailand-country-profile>.

²²⁸ USAID, “U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017.”

²²⁹ USAID, “U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017.”

Although development assistance fluctuated substantially, the development aid amount was still an average high of \$4.8 million, but with an overall declining trend. The lowest level occurred in 2006 at \$1.3 million while the highest during the Thaksin years was \$13.4 million in 2002 with the greatest source of U.S. development assistance coming from the Tsunami Recovery and Reconstruction Fund at \$1.8 million in 2005.²³⁰

Figure 12. U.S. Development Assistance to Projects in Thailand under the Thaksin Administration (2001–2006)²³¹



U.S. foreign assistance under the Bush Administration was primarily given to countries that promoted democracy, which the administration saw as an advancement of U.S. strategic interests and global developments.²³² Under this guideline, Washington restricted foreign assistance to several East and South Asian countries in order to encourage democratic transitions within those countries. President Bush also enacted policies such as

²³⁰ USAID, “U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017.”

²³¹ U.S. Agency for International Development figures are in constant dollars based on 2017.

²³² Lum, *U.S. Foreign Aid to East and South Asia: Selected Recipients*, CRS Report No. RL31362 (2006).

the Millennium Challenge Account in March 2002 to dramatically increase foreign aid.²³³ The Account was a fund aimed at providing \$5 billion annually to selected countries that are “ruling justly, investing in their people, and establishing economic freedom.”²³⁴ It is likely, then, that U.S. development funding to Thailand at \$13.4 million in 2002—a 509 percent increase from \$2.2 million in 2001—was in response to Thailand’s democratic election of Thaksin in 2001.²³⁵

Yet, by 2003, U.S. development assistance significantly declined by nearly 63 percent to \$5 million and continued falling by 70 percent to \$1.5 million in 2005. The decline in development assistance in 2003 has various contributing factors. First, the Thai government announced in 2003 that it will stop accepting foreign development aid and proposed the aid be redirected to the Kingdom’s neighboring, poorer countries.²³⁶ Second, while some scholars argue that U.S. foreign assistance in the early 2000s contributed to the rise in Thaksin’s “war on drugs,” extrajudicial campaigns in 2003, it is also likely that Washington decrease development aid to Thailand since Thaksin’s campaign was a violation of human rights.²³⁷ Essentially, Thaksin’s actions challenged the principles of the Millennium Challenge Account. during the Thaksin years may have fluctuated drastically due to domestic developments in Thailand as well as U.S. policies and mandates.

Although U.S. development assistance to Thailand continued falling in 2004, by 2005, it increased 273 percent to \$5.6 million as a result of the U.S. government’s pledge

²³³ Steven Radelet, “Bush and Foreign Aid,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 2003, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/10FD8793C3D08C18?p=AWNB>.

²³⁴ Quoted in Radelet, “Bush and Foreign Aid,” 104.

²³⁵ USAID, “U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017.”

²³⁶ European External Action Service, *Thailand-European Community Strategy Paper for the period 2007–2013* (Brussels, Belgium: European External Action Service, 2013), http://www.eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/thailand/csp/07_13_en.pdf.

²³⁷ Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme, Jr., “Does U.S. Foreign Aid Undermine Human Rights? The “Thaksinification” of the War on Terror Discourses and the Human Rights Crisis in Thailand, 2001 to 2006,” *Human Rights Review* 19, no. 1 (2018): 73–95, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-017-0482-2>.

to help Thailand rebuild after the December 26, 2004 tsunami that struck the Kingdom.²³⁸ In the wake of the tsunami attack, USAID pledged \$15 million in aid to affected Asian countries—Thailand included—only to later add \$20 million more in aid. This, again, accounts for the share of U.S. development assistance to Thailand via the Tsunami Recovery and Reconstruction Fund at \$1.8 million in 2005.²³⁹ Finally, in addition to Thailand receiving support from USAID, it also received development assistance from the USTDA.

The USTDA mobilized training, technical assistance, and other capacity-building activities to the affected countries, including Thailand, and funded over \$9.2 million in regional and bilateral development projects.²⁴⁰ Their projects included building clean water supply, disaster preparedness planning, early warning systems, energy systems reconstruction, emergency communications systems, small- and medium-enterprise recovery and financing, and wetlands restoration. Likewise, the USTDA provided over \$4.9 million in tsunami recovery efforts in Indonesia and Thailand since 2004 with 13 projects, focused on emergency communications, energy, environment and banking/ICT, and transportation sectors, although at lower levels than in 2005.

China, on the other hand, has provided development assistance to Thailand through study visit and research promotions.²⁴¹ From 2004 to 2005, China sent multiple scientists and researchers to promote economic linkages between the two countries and increase advancements in the fields of science and technology. Lastly, U.S. development assistance to Thailand declined by 76 percent due to U.S. law mandating sanctions on U.S. foreign

²³⁸ Barry Schweid, “U.S. Adds \$20 Million to Earthquake Relief,” *Associated Press News Service*, December 28, 2004, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/1416B0A5242CA690?p=AWNB>; Peter Mackler, “US Boosts Tsunami Aid to 35 Million Dollars; Says it’s Not Stingy,” *Agence France-Presse*, December 29, 2004, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/1074A2A755EE4910?p=AWNB>.

²³⁹ USAID, “U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017”; U.S. Trade and Development Agency, *U.S. Trade and Development Agency Annual Report 2006* (Arlington, VA: USTDA, 2006), https://www.ustda.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/about/reports/annualreports/USTDA_AnnualReport_2006_0.pdf.

²⁴⁰ U.S. Trade and Development Agency, *U.S. Trade and Development Agency Annual Report 2006*.

²⁴¹ Manarungsan, *Thailand-China Cooperation in Trade, Investment and Official Development Assistance*.

assistance to Thailand after Thaksin, the elected head of government, was ousted via coup.²⁴²

4. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Economic Relations Under the Thaksin Administration

Thailand-U.S. economic relations during the Thaksin era as measured through total bilateral trade, U.S. FDI to Thailand, and U.S. development assistance through USAID and USTDA to Thailand presented a mixed picture of increased total bilateral trade, increased FDI, and fluctuating but downward trending U.S. development assistance to Thailand. Overall, however, the economic relationship between the two countries was relatively healthy. In terms of total bilateral trade, minus the one low trading point of \$19.7 billion in 2002, Thailand-U.S. trade concluded on a high note of \$30.4 billion in 2006, the highest of the entire Thaksin period. U.S. FDI in Thailand, similar to bilateral trading figures, started high at approximately \$6.1 billion in 2001, increased to \$7.7 billion in 2002, but dropped to \$6.8 billion in 2003 due to the U.S. diversifying its investment portfolios to include other economically growing countries. The Thaksin years end at \$10.6 billion in FDI in 2006. Lastly, U.S. development aid to Thailand from 2001 to 2006 saw the most striking changes annually, but this was due to domestic developments respective to both countries and not entirely reflective of changes in bilateral ties.

B. THAILAND-U.S. ECONOMIC RELATIONS: AFTER THE 2006 COUP (2007–2014)

The years between the 2006 and 2014 coups held increased volatility but also strong growth in Thailand-U.S. economic relations. Total bilateral trade increased by 25 percent and FDI increased by 77 percent—albeit with some periods of decline. U.S. development assistance increased sharply by 460 percent from \$1.5 million in 2007 to \$8.4 million in 2014. However, assessing the actions of Thai state leaders from late 2006 to mid-2014 and how they—and the coup and its aftermath—may have contributed to a decline or

²⁴² Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act before the House Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, 113th Cong. (2014), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/2855?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22%5C%22military+coup%5C%22%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=28>

improvement in Thailand's economic engagement with the United States, and vice versa, presents a challenge. Thailand lacked a concrete foreign policy because multiple prime ministers from divergent factions, as explained in the previous chapter, led Thailand during this period, starting with General Surayud Chulanont from October 2006 to January 2007.²⁴³ Thaksin loyalist Samak Sundaravej followed Surayud from January 2007 to September 2008, followed by Thaksin's brother-in-law Somchai Wongsawat from September 2008 to December 2008, establishment leader Abhisit Vejjajiva from December 2008 to August 2011, and, lastly, Thaksin's younger sister Yingluck Shinawatra from August 2011 to her ousting in the May 2014 coup.

When Surayud took office after the 2006 coup, his economic policies were constrained due to his military-backed government's lack of expertise on economic matters and its focus on restoring order.²⁴⁴ Analysts argue that the coup itself and Surayud's role as a military prime minister gave U.S. investors little confidence in the Thai economy, thereby affecting how much FDI went to Thailand. More problematically, Thailand-U.S. economic relations are not as easily discernable under the Samak and Somchai administrations, given the two leaders' short terms of office, although, bilateral trade seems to have continued largely unabated while FDI declined.²⁴⁵ As for the civilian Abhisit government, Benjamin Zawacki submits that the United States' criticism of the Abhisit administration for their 2010 violent military crackdown on the Thaksin-affiliated United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) protest, contributed to Abhisit moving away from Washington and closer to Beijing.²⁴⁶ Arguably, this may have placed strains on Thailand-U.S. economic ties.

Finally, after Yingluck was elected and assumed office in August 2011, it was reasonable to think that a democratically restored Thailand might contribute to stronger

²⁴³ Chachavalpongpun, "Diplomacy under Siege: Thailand's Political Crisis and the Impact on Foreign Policy," 448; Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

²⁴⁴ Evan S. Medeiros, et. al., *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China's Rise*, RAND Report No. MG736 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG736.pdf.

²⁴⁵ Ian Storey, *Southeast Asia and the Rise of China* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

²⁴⁶ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

Thailand-U.S. economic relations. This expectation is understandable, too, given that when Yingluck met with President Obama in 2012—the first diplomatic visit by a U.S. President to Thailand since 2003—the two leaders welcomed plans to convene a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement Joint Council to serve as a foundation for expanding Thailand-U.S. economic relations.²⁴⁷ Moreover, their joint press statement highlighted Obama welcoming Yingluck’s interest for Thailand to join his efforts to create the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was intended to be a trade agreement to reduce tariffs between member states.²⁴⁸ Yet, these seemingly optimistic efforts made to promote Thailand-U.S. economic relations were to no avail. The Yingluck administration never committed to joining the TPP. The aforementioned events correspond to the volatility we see in bilateral trade, investments, and development assistance between the two coups. Meanwhile, Sino-Thai economic relations were growing based on Thai leaders engaging more with China, as well as Beijing officials offering more assistance to Thailand.

1. Thailand-U.S. Total Bilateral Trade: 2007–2014

Despite Thaksin’s ousting from government via a military coup d’état on September 19, 2006, the United States, a firm advocate of democracy, continued conducting trade at incrementally higher levels with its oldest ally in Asia. In fact, as illustrated in Figure 13, from 2007 to 2014, Thailand-U.S. total bilateral trade increased 25 percent from \$31.1 billion in 2007 to \$39 billion in 2014 (depicted in dotted red line on chart), compared to somewhat weaker trade from 2001 to 2006.²⁴⁹ While some fluctuation occurred, none was extreme. The lowest level occurred in 2009 at \$26 billion, followed by a rapid recovery, while the period’s high was realized in 2013 at \$40 billion, just above the

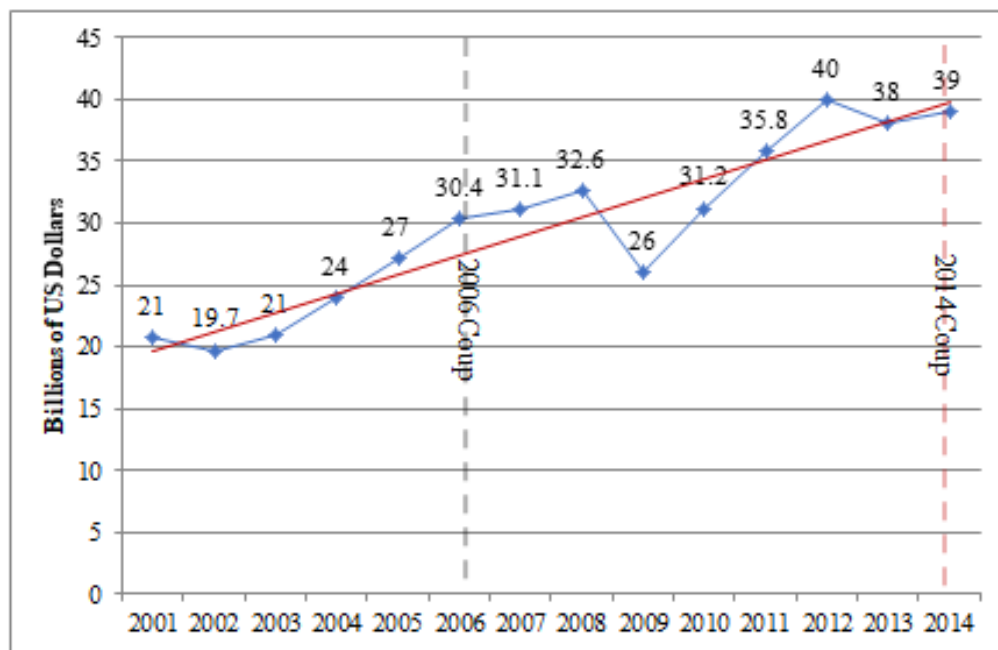
²⁴⁷ “A Look Back at U.S. Presidential Visits to Thailand,” U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, November, 4, 2016, <https://th.usembassy.gov/u-s-presidential-visits-thailand/>; “Joint Press Statement between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra,” White House, November 18, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/18/joint-press-statement-between-president-barack-obama-and-prime-minister->.

²⁴⁸ President Donald J. Trump withdrew the United States from the TPP in 2017, and the partnership has since been renamed the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), without U.S. involvement. “What is the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)?” Council on Foreign Relations, January 4, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-trans-pacific-partnership-tpp>.

²⁴⁹ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

period's ending level of \$39 billion. Interestingly, in the years immediately following the 2006 coup, when one might expect a retraction, Thailand-U.S. bilateral trade increased from \$31.1 billion in 2007 to \$32.6 billion in 2008. Taken together, total bilateral trade between Thailand and the United States nearly doubled between 2001 and 2014, from \$21 billion to \$39 billion. Like the years pre-dating the 2006 coup, Thailand-U.S. total trade continued its upward trend, as shown in the slanted red line.

Figure 13. Thailand-U.S. Total Bilateral Trade after the 2006 Coup
(2007–2014)²⁵⁰



The prevailing arguments for why total Thailand-U.S. trade grew steadily is the historical legacy of the alliance, the importance of Thailand as a U.S. trading partner, and the Thai economy depending heavily on its steadfast trading partners for economic growth.²⁵¹ This argument holds weight, considering the Office of the U.S. Trade

²⁵⁰ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

²⁵¹ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593; Walter Lohman, “Reinvigorating the U.S.-Thailand Alliance,” Heritage Foundation, September 11, 2011, <https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/reinvigorating-the-us-thailand-alliance>.

Representative boasting of the importance of Thailand-U.S. economic ties dating back to 1833.²⁵² Yet, this is not to say that the Thai economy was not impacted by the coup. U.S. President Bush suspended all negotiations for a Thailand-U.S. FTA following the coup, and no new negotiations have occurred since.²⁵³ The coup created political uncertainty that led to a decline in Thai GDP when Thai government-supported policies caused Thailand's annual GDP growth to decline from 4.97 percent in 2006 to 0.98 percent in 2014.²⁵⁴ Likewise, prior to the coup, Thai GDP growth from 2001 to 2006 averaged approximately 5.37 percent. After the coup, the Thai GDP growth from 2007 to 2014 averaged only 3.29 percent.

Figure 13 also shows a decline in the two countries' trade in 2009 and 2013 but the reasons are not attributable to the coup. In 2009, Thailand's overall global exports collapsed in the wake of the financial crisis, dropping by 14 percent.²⁵⁵ This fallout in Thailand global exports likewise affected Thailand-U.S. trade, where their bilateral trade declined to \$26 billion in 2009 from \$32.6 billion in 2008. The slight decline in 2013 to \$38 billion from the steady trade increases in the previous three years was likely largely due to Yingluck's rice subsidies scandal.²⁵⁶ In 2012, Yingluck's government announced a rice-subsidy plan that would purchase rice at around 50 percent above market value from Thai farmers and stockpile it prior to selling the rice on open markets.²⁵⁷ By early 2014, Thailand's public debt rose to 46 percent of GDP from 41 percent of GDP in 2011. While this did not significantly impact Thailand-U.S. trade, it still caused a decline in total trade by 0.05 percent from \$40 billion in 2012 to \$38 billion in 2013. This arguably affected the U.S. trade deficit with Thailand, which rose by 5.93 percent from -\$14.5 billion in 2006 to

²⁵² "Thailand," Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/thailand>.

²⁵³ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593

²⁵⁴ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593; "GDP Growth (annual %) – Thailand," World Bank, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2018&locations=TH&start=2001>.

²⁵⁵ Nidhiprabha, "The Rise and Fall of Thailand's Export-Oriented Industries," 129.

²⁵⁶ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593.

²⁵⁷ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593.

-\$15.4 billion in 2014. In comparison, Thailand had a 2014 trade deficit with China of -\$8.1 billion.²⁵⁸ However, once Prayut took power in 2014, he ended the rice subsidy plan, which enabled the Thai economy and Thailand-U.S. bilateral trade to grow: Thailand's exports to the United States in April 2014 were at \$2.2 million but gradually increased by 15 percent to \$2.5 million in December 2014.²⁵⁹

As for Sino-Thai trade relations, they too, maintained their upward trend. In December 2011, for instance, Bangkok and Beijing agreed for the Bank of Thailand and the People's Bank of China to conduct a three-year currency swap worth 70 billion renminbi.²⁶⁰ In October 2013, incumbent Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Thailand concluded in him and Yingluck praising their economic partnership and desire to achieve a bilateral trade goal of \$100 billion in 2015, which would continue to be guided by their Five-Year Development Plan on Trade and Economic Cooperation.²⁶¹ This reflects the growing Sino-Thai investment relations at the time.

2. Thailand-U.S. Foreign Direct Investment: 2007–2014

U.S. FDI in Thailand from 2007 to 2014 varied greatly as reported in data collected from the USBEA and displayed in Figure 14.²⁶² FDI in 2006 was \$10.6 billion and modestly declined to \$10.2 billion in 2007, the year after the coup. It continued its downward trend to \$9.1 billion in 2008, in line with the Global Financial Crisis, before rebounding slightly to \$9.4 billion in 2009. By 2010, U.S. FDI increased 37 percent to \$12.9 billion but gradually declined to \$11.8 billion in 2011, \$10.7 billion in 2012, and

²⁵⁸ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019); "Thailand-China Trade Balance," Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://oec.world/en/visualize/line/hs92/show/tha/chn/all/2006.2014/>.

²⁵⁹ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593; U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

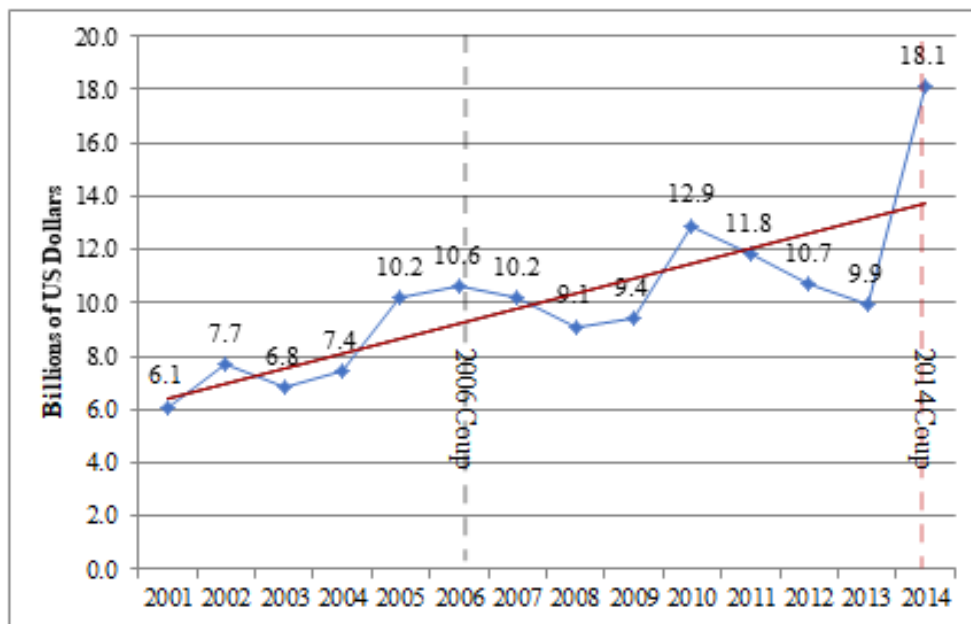
²⁶⁰ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

²⁶¹ "Joint Press Statement on Long-Term Program on the Development of Thailand – China Relations," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, October 14, 2013, <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/media-center/14/39995-Joint-Press-Statement-on-Long-Term-Program--on-the.html>.

²⁶² U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "U.S. Direct Investment Abroad: Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data."

\$9.9 billion in 2013. Yet in 2014, U.S. FDI into Thailand soared to \$18.1 billion, the highest level since the turn of the 21st century. In comparing the Thaksin era to the post-2006 coup period, we see continued volatility after the 2006 coup but an overall upward trend line noted in red on the chart.

Figure 14. Thailand-U.S. Foreign Direct Investment after the 2006 Coup
(2006–2014)²⁶³



These sharp increases and decreases in U.S. FDI into Thailand are attributed to Thailand's shifting political landscape. Thailand politics became volatile and increasingly polarized after Thaksin announced a House dissolution on February 24, 2006 and called for a snap election on April 2, 2006 in attempts to deescalate the oppositional backlash and

²⁶³ Data shows U.S. direct investment position abroad on a historical-cost basis. "Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data. U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

political crisis resulting from selling his family-owned Shin Corporation to Temasek.²⁶⁴ U.S. investors became concerned about the possible implications of a power vacuum in Thailand on U.S. investments and firms with the U.S. ASEAN Business Council specifically citing fears among U.S. investors that “a new government may reverse some of the previous government’s investment policies.”²⁶⁵ This concern and fear prompted some U.S. firms to suspend local projects in Thailand and shift investments to Malaysia instead, hence the 3.7 percent drop in U.S. FDI to Thailand from \$10.6 billion in 2006 to \$10.2 billion in 2007.²⁶⁶

U.S. FDI to Thailand continued its downward trend to \$9.1 billion in 2008, a 10.8 percent decrease from \$10.2 billion in 2007. However, by 2009, FDI rose slightly by 3.3 percent to \$9.4 billion in response to Thailand and the United States’ efforts at strengthening their economic ties in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis that started in December 2007. Former U.S. Ambassador Eric G. John explains that the United States sought to increase bilateral cooperation with Thailand on trade and investment as a means to boost economic growth and suggested that the two countries “should cooperate on eliminating trade barriers to promote export growth for both sides during the economic difficulty.”²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Thaksin was accused as a “sell out” to the Thai nation and when his family sold a stake of their Shin Corp telecommunications business to the Singaporean company, Temasek, for 73 billion baht (approximately \$1.8 billion). This was possible due to the Thaksin Administration liberalizing Thai investment laws that previously restricted foreign ownership of state-deemed strategic national assets, such as telecommunications industry. The new Thai Telecommunication Act of 2006, which replaced the Telecom Business Law of 2001, authorized foreign holdings up to 50%. Promptly after the new law passed, the Shinawatra family sold 49.5% of Shin Corp to Temasek, leading demonstrators to call for Thaksin to leave the country and denouncing his act as selling the Kingdom out to “Singaporean imperialism.” Kelvin Rowley, “The Downfall of Thaksin Shinawatra’s CEO-state,” APSNet Policy Forum, November 09, 2006, <https://nautilus.org/apsnet/0634a-rowley-html/>; Daljit Singh and Lorraine Carlos Salazar, *Southeast Asian Affairs 2006* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

²⁶⁵ “U.S. Firms Cautious on Investing in Thailand,” *Nation*, June 20, 2006, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/112642BF26232730?p=AWNB>.

²⁶⁶ “Thailand at Risk of Losing Steam,” *Nation*, June 27, 2006, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/1128E5B7B499CE18?p=AWNB>.

²⁶⁷ “New Commerce Asks U.S. for Help,” *Nation*, December 27, 2008, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/125868821EDE4C48?p=AWNB>.

The following year in 2010, U.S. FDI to Thailand surged 37 percent to \$12.9 billion, which is attributable to the Kingdom's 2009 economic reform policies aimed at attracting foreign investment and prompted by then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his economic ministers, who were anxious about the U.S. economic meltdown and foreign investment declines.²⁶⁸ Yet, despite the 37 percent FDI increase, 2010 also marked the year commencing the gradual decline of U.S. FDI to Thailand that fell 23 percent from \$12.9 billion in 2010 to \$9.9 billion in 2013.

Political unrest and natural disaster in Thailand were the factors for declining U.S. FDI. Thailand entered another period of political crisis in May 2010 when the mass political protest from March to May 2010 in Bangkok led by Thaksin's supporters resulted in violent clashes with the Thai security forces.²⁶⁹ At least 90 people died with 2,000 more wounded, rising concerns yet again that the possibility of civil war will negatively affect FDI.²⁷⁰ By 2011, Thailand's economy was further tested when the Kingdom was hit with the worse flood in decades, thereby leading analysts to speculate that "a lack of adequate infrastructure to handling flooding ... would lead to a long-term loss of foreign investment."²⁷¹ Indeed, U.S. FDI to Thailand continued to contract from \$12.9 billion in 2010 to \$11.8 billion in 2011, then \$10.7 billion in 2012, and \$9.9 billion in 2013 when political demonstrations led by the anti-Thaksin opposition Democrat Party erupted in

²⁶⁸ "Briefing – Asia Economic News – March 18, 2009," *Asia Pulse*, March 18, 2009, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/127074BA6927FAF0?p=AWNB>; Bank of Thailand, *Annual Economic Report 2009* (Bangkok, Thailand: Bank of Thailand, 2009), https://www.bot.or.th/English/ResearchAndPublications/Report/DocLib_AnnualEconReport/09.pdf.

²⁶⁹ "Descent into Chaos," Human Rights Watch, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/05/03/descent-chaos/thailands-2010-red-shirt-protests-and-government-crackdown>.

²⁷⁰ Martin Petty, "In 'Teflon Thailand,' Protests Test a Weak Economy," *Reuters*, November 29, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/thailand-protests-economy/in-teflon-thailand-protests-test-a-weak-economy-idUSL4N0JD15020131129>; Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Thailand May End up Harming its Neighbors and its Trading Partners," *Daily Star*, May 19, 2010, <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.nps.edu/resources/doc/nb/news/12FCC0700038A018?p=AWNB>.

²⁷¹ Seth Mydans, "Thai Prime Minister to take Command of Flood Control Efforts," *New York Times*, October 21, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/asia/bangkok-opens-floodgates-as-government-response-is-criticized.html>.

Bangkok.²⁷² Nonetheless, U.S. FDI to Thailand skyrocketed 82 percent from \$9.9 billion in 2013 to \$18.1 billion in 2014. This was likely due to Thailand's Board of Investment's announcement in 2014 of a new strategy to promote FDI over a seven-year period from 2015 to 2022 by developing, among many things, ten Special Economic Zones to offer additional tax and non-tax benefits to investors.²⁷³

3. U.S. Development Assistance to Projects in Thailand: 2007–2014

Finally, U.S. development assistance via USAID averaged a low \$1.2 million from 2006 to 2008 before slightly increasing in 2009 to \$3.8 million and then fluctuating dramatically from 2010 to 2014 (Figure 15). FDI surged to \$17.7 million in 2010, but fell significantly to \$2.6 million in 2011, then increased substantially to \$12.4 million in 2012, before a slight drop to \$9 million in 2013, and modest decline to \$8.4 million in 2014. Compared to Thailand-U.S. economic ties measured in bilateral trade and FDI, U.S. development assistance was more unstable but, overall, was trending upward as noted in the purple vertical line in Figure 15. Development assistance to Thailand under the Thaksin Administration, on the other hand, was trending downward as noted by the red line also in Figure 15.

From 2006 to 2008, U.S. development assistance via USAID and USTDA stagnated due to U.S. law mandating sanctions because of the 2006 coup.²⁷⁴ Therefore, the USTDA, for one, had to analyze the status of each project in Thailand and effectively adjust funding to certain projects while suspending the rest to balance USTDA interest of executing projects already initiated against adhering to the provision. When Washington restored economic and development assistance to Thailand in February 2008, development

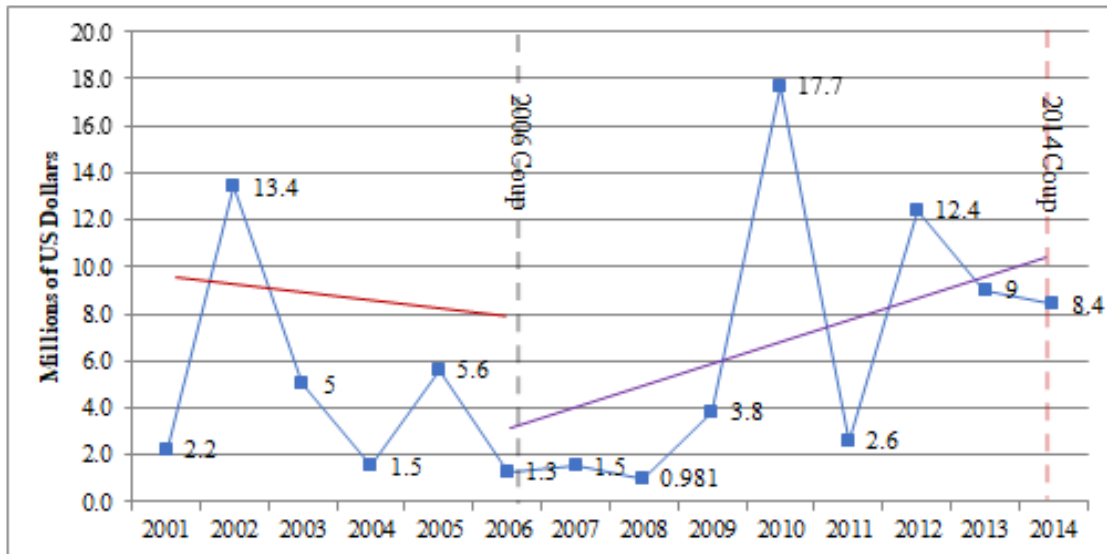
²⁷² Amy Sawitta Lefevre, "Thai Capital Hit by Biggest Protests Since Deadly 2010 Unrest," *Reuters*, November 24, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-protest/thai-capital-hit-by-biggest-protests-since-deadly-2010-unrest-idUSBRE9AN09Q20131124>.

²⁷³ "2016 Investment Climate Statement," U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://th.usembassy.gov/business/investment-climate-statement/>.

²⁷⁴ H.R., Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act; U.S. Trade and Development Agency, FY2011 Agency Strategic Plan and Appropriations Memos, FY2005-FY2010 (Arlington, VA: USTDA, 2011), https://www.governmentattic.org/4docs/USTDA-Plan_Appropriations_2005-2011.pdf.

aid through USAID was restored, but only some for USTDA, which increased the amount of U.S. development assistance to \$3.8 million in 2009.²⁷⁵

Figure 15. U.S. Development Assistance to Projects in Thailand after the 2006 Coup (2006–2014)²⁷⁶



Still, development assistance through USAID and USTDA increased exponentially by 365 percent in 2010 to \$17.7 million from \$3.8 million in 2009 due to joint-Thailand-U.S. efforts at preventing HIV/AIDS, combating terrorism, and maintaining peace and stability in Thailand.²⁷⁷ Of this \$17.7 million, USTDA provided \$534,000 to Thailand to continue preexisting USTDA assistance in the Kingdom’s state-owned oil and gas

²⁷⁵ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593; U.S. Trade and Development Agency, *FY2011 Agency Strategic Plan and Appropriations Memos, FY2005-FY2010*.

²⁷⁶ USAID (U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017); USTDA, *FY2011 Agency Strategic Plan and Appropriations Memos, FY2005-FY2010*. Displayed in constant dollars.

²⁷⁷ “Foreign Assistance in Thailand,” Foreign Assistance, accessed November 26, 2019, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/explore/country/Thailand>; National AIDS Prevention and Alleviation Committee, *UNGASS Country Progress Report Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: National AIDS Prevention and Alleviation Committee, 2009), http://data.unaids.org/pub/report/2010/thailand_2010_country_progress_report_en.pdf.

company, PTT.²⁷⁸ The goal was to identify specifications and designs for the Kingdom's first liquefied natural gas (LNG) receiving terminal at Map Ta Phut, which has since been hailed as a USTDA "success story." The USTDA 2010 Annual Report boasted that, at the time of publication, in an effort to provide critical technologies and services to the terminal, at least 22 U.S. companies from 13 states had signed contracts with the USTDA and Thailand. Unfortunately, U.S. development assistance to Thailand dropped significantly in 2011 to \$2.6 million, but rebounded to \$12.4 million in 2012.²⁷⁹

The uptick in U.S. development assistance to Thailand in 2012 was in response to the flooding in Thailand that started in July 2011. The United States, in November 2011, announced over \$10 million in additional assistance and civic aid.²⁸⁰ China also provided development assistance to Thailand to the tune of \$1 million to overcome the flooding disaster, thus highlighting growing Sino-Thai economic-development ties.²⁸¹ USTDA assistance, on the other hand, went toward modernizing Thailand's rail sector and maintaining the regional office in Bangkok.²⁸² As for the declining trend in 2013 at \$9 million and in 2014 at \$8.4 million, those figures reflected USAID's determination to divert funding toward fewer, higher performing sectors in Thailand as opposed to maximizing the number of sectors assisted.²⁸³

²⁷⁸ U.S. Trade and Development Agency, *USTDA 2010 Annual Report* (Arlington, VA: USTDA, 2010), https://www.ustda.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/about/reports/annualreports/ustda_annualreport_2010.pdf.

²⁷⁹ USTDA, *FY2011 Agency Strategic Plan and Appropriations Memos, FY2005-FY2010*.

²⁷⁹ USAID, "U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017."

²⁸⁰ "U.S. Assistance to Thailand for Flood Recovery," U.S. Department of State, November 16, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/11/177239.htm>.

²⁸¹ Zhongwei Qin, "Vice-president Xi Hails Ties with Thailand," *China Daily*, December 23, 2011, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2011-12/23/content_14310794.htm.

²⁸² U.S. Trade and Development Agency, *USTDA 2011 Annual Report* (Arlington, VA: USTDA, 2011), https://www.ustda.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/about/reports/annualreports/ustda_annualreport_2011.pdf.

²⁸³ U.S. Trade and Development Agency, *Foreign Operations FY2013 Performance Report* (Arlington, VA: USTDA, 2013), https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1870/USAID_FY2013_APR.pdf.

4. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Economic Relations between Coups

Economic ties in the years between the coup of September 19, 2006, and the coup of May 22, 2014, were markedly different from the years under the Thaksin administration but not necessarily in expected ways. Despite political instability and frequent regime changes, Thailand-U.S. bilateral trade increased to its second-highest point to date at \$39 billion in 2014, as did U.S. FDI to Thailand at \$40 billion in 2012. FDI faced more turbulent fluctuations than did bilateral trade but enjoyed similar upward trends. U.S. development assistance through USAID and USTDA, on the other hand, was initially curtailed by the 2006 coup, with some funding suspended to Thailand.

The drivers of these changes are both domestic occurrences in Thailand and international developments outside the Kingdom—two factors other than the coup. For instance, the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis led to declines in Thailand’s global exports, which temporarily curtailed Thailand-U.S. bilateral trade. Thailand’s political crisis and civil unrest, too, negatively affected U.S. FDI to the Kingdom. Natural disasters in Thailand and joint-projects with the United States, such as preventing HIV/AIDS and combating terrorism, however, raised U.S. development assistance to Thailand despite U.S. law sanctioning some assistance. Considering these factors, Thailand-U.S. economic relations appear ripe for further volatility following the 2014 coup that was the latest and fourth-most defining coup in Thai.²⁸⁴

C. THAILAND-U.S. ECONOMIC RELATIONS: AFTER THE 2014 COUP (2014–2019)

In the years since the May 2014 coup, Thailand-U.S. economic relations improved dramatically in the area of bilateral trade, but they have yet to see the robustness they once enjoyed in FDI. U.S. development assistance to Thailand was most affected by the coup as it fell 91 percent from \$8.4 million in 2014 to \$724,620 in 2018. For the first time, U.S. FDI to Thailand began trending downward in the years after the 2014 coup (purple line in Figure 16) compared to overall upward trend in the years predating this coup (red line in

²⁸⁴ Chris Baker, “The 2014 Thai Coup and Some Roots of Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no. 3 (2016): 388–404, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2016.1150500>.

Figure 16). Similarly, U.S. development assistance began an overall downward trend from 2014 to 2018. This dearth of development assistance, which the U.S. government controls, can perhaps be attributed to the 2014 coup and the actions of the authoritarian Prayut who retained his self-appointed premiership for five years after said coup. However, Prayut's meeting with President Trump in October 2017 to discuss the state of Thailand-U.S. relations confirms that the United States is not above aiding authoritarian regimes, which it does so regularly around the world based on factors deemed more important than democratization.

Their meeting, which was the first between a U.S. president and Thai prime minister since 2012, saw Trump and Prayut speaking highly of the enduring Thailand-U.S. alliance, acknowledging the increased significance of Thailand-U.S. trade relations, and underscoring the importance of strengthening bilateral economic ties.²⁸⁵ Their focus is perplexing, given that bilateral trade is not broken. The most recent data on the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) indicate that U.S. imports to Thailand held relatively steady, registering 6.44 percent in 2014 and 6.24 percent in 2016, while, Thai exports to the United States increased marginally from 10.53 percent in 2014 to 11.41 percent in 2016. However, while total trade increased, U.S. FDI in Thailand and development aid to the Kingdom both contracted significantly.

1. Thailand-U.S. Total Bilateral Trade: 2014–2018

Unsurprisingly, given the negative impact of the coup and ongoing instability and uncertainty on the economy, after the 2014 coup, the Thai economy grew at its slowest rate in three years, at only 0.7 percent GDP annually.²⁸⁶ Despite this, as shown in Figure 16, Thailand-U.S. total bilateral trade continued to very gradually increase from \$39 billion in 2014, to \$40 billion in 2015 and 2016, a 2.56 percent rise over the three years.²⁸⁷ The same report reveals that total trade reached \$42.1 billion in 2017 and \$44.3 billion in 2018, the

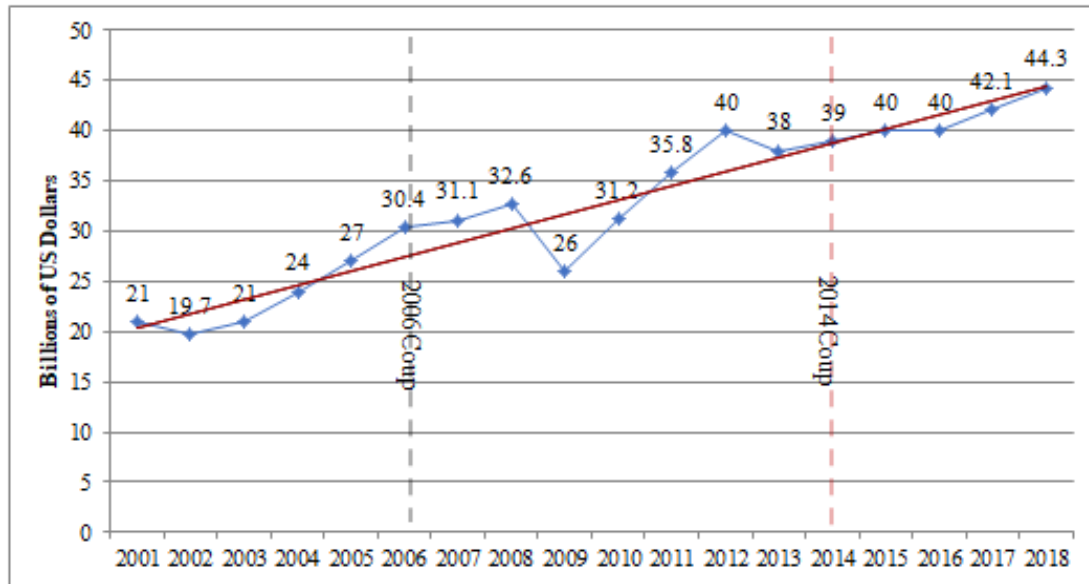
²⁸⁵ “Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Thailand,” White House, October 2, 2017, <https://th.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-united-states-america-kingdom-thailand/>.

²⁸⁶ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593.

²⁸⁷ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

last year for which figures are available. This translates to a 13 percent growth in total bilateral trade between the two countries over five years.

Figure 16. Thailand-U.S. Total Bilateral Trade after the 2014 Coup
(2014–2018)²⁸⁸



Indeed, Thailand-U.S. bilateral trade has trended upward since 2001. In the first year of the Thaksin era, it stood at \$21 billion and realized \$30.4 billion in 2006, a 44 percent increase. From 2007 to 2014, their bilateral trade grew from \$31.1 billion to \$39 billion, a 25 percent increase. From 2001 to 2018, then, bilateral trade increased significantly by 111 percent.

Meanwhile, Sino-Thai trade relations under the Prayut Administration also continue to grow. This, perhaps, is attributable to Prayut engaging with Chinese officials to diversify its economic relationships, stimulate economic growth to help stabilize domestic politics, and offset losses from development assistance and economic assistance

²⁸⁸ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. 2018 is the last year complete data are available.

for military supplies from its American ally.²⁸⁹ On December 23, 2014, during Prayut's meeting with President Xi Jinping, Prayut expressed appreciation for China's agricultural imports to Thailand, which he deemed conducive to their countries' bilateral trade development.²⁹⁰ Not only were Thailand's imports comprised 16.9 percent from Chinese goods in 2014, but China's share grew to 21.6 percent in 2016.²⁹¹ The World Bank also reports that 6.24 percent of Thailand's imports came from the United States in 2016. Sino-Thai trade relations thus improved during Prayut's tenure to where China is now Thailand's largest import-export partner at \$79 billion total trade, compared to the United States at \$43.3 billion in total trade.²⁹² This shift in positions came in 2018.²⁹³

Nevertheless, Thailand-U.S. trade still increased at the same time with increases in Sino-Thai trade. U.S. goods exports to Thailand in 2018 were at \$12.6 billion, a \$1.6 billion and 14.5 percent increase from 2017 and, overall, a 59.5 percent increase from \$7.9 billion in 2006 and 6.7 percent increase from \$11.8 billion in 2014.²⁹⁴ The U.S. Trade Representative also reports U.S. goods imports from Thailand totaled \$31.9 billion in 2018, a 2.4 percent increase from 2017, and overall a 41.7 percent increase from \$22.5 billion in 2006 and a 17.3 percent increase from \$27.2 billion in 2014.

The U.S. deficit with Thailand persists, growing by 26 percent from -\$15.4 billion in 2014 to -\$19.4 billion in 2018.²⁹⁵ Based on the first nine months of 2019, where the deficit-to-date stands at -\$14.9 billion, it is likely that the annual deficit will again increase

²⁸⁹ Patrick Jory, "Enter the Dragon: Thailand gets Closer to China," *Interpreter*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/enter-dragon-thailand-gets-closer-china>.

²⁹⁰ "Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha of Thailand," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, December 23, 2014, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1222692.htm>.

²⁹¹ World Integrated Trade Solution (Thailand; accessed June 15, 2019), <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/THA>.

²⁹² Observatory of Economic Complexity (Thailand; accessed June 17, 2019), <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/tha/>.

²⁹³ "Thailand – Market Overview," Export, August 9, 2019, <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Thailand-market-overview>.

²⁹⁴ "Thailand," U.S. Trade Representative, accessed September 6, 2019, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/southeast-asia-pacific/thailand>.

²⁹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade (Trade in Goods with Thailand; accessed September 3, 2019).

and place greater strains on Thailand-U.S. trade relations under the Trump administration. A U.S. Trade Representative's press release in July 2019 stated that Thailand and the United States have initiated talks under their Trade and Investment Framework Agreement on the status of their trade relationship and the importance of Thailand addressing a U.S. trade deficit, among other related issues.²⁹⁶ In October 2019, new concerns emerged that Thailand-U.S. trade would decline, given President Trump suspending \$1.3 billion in trade preferences for Thailand over concerns about workers' rights.²⁹⁷ Critics regard this suspension as a catalyst to worsening U.S.-Thailand relations.

2. Thailand-U.S. Foreign Direct Investment: 2014–2018

In the wake of the 2014 coup, U.S. FDI in Thailand, as indicated in the data obtained from USBEA and illustrated in Figure 17, held relatively steady, averaging \$17.3 between 2014–18, but experienced a slight decline in 2017.²⁹⁸ It dropped slightly from \$18.1 billion in 2014 to \$17.9 billion in 2015, and rebounded to \$18 billion in 2016, only to decline to \$15 billion in 2017. In 2018, FDI increased to \$17.6 billion. The cause for these minor fluctuations in U.S. FDI into Thailand from 2014 to 2018, however, had to do with more than just the state of Thai political instability resulting from the 2014 coup.²⁹⁹ The differences in FDI numbers were also attributable to changes in Thailand's foreign investment rules.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ "United States and Thailand Discuss Fair and Reciprocal Engagement on Trade, Importance of Resolving Priority Issues," U.S. Trade Representative, July 22, 2019, <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2019/july/united-states-and-thailand-discuss>.

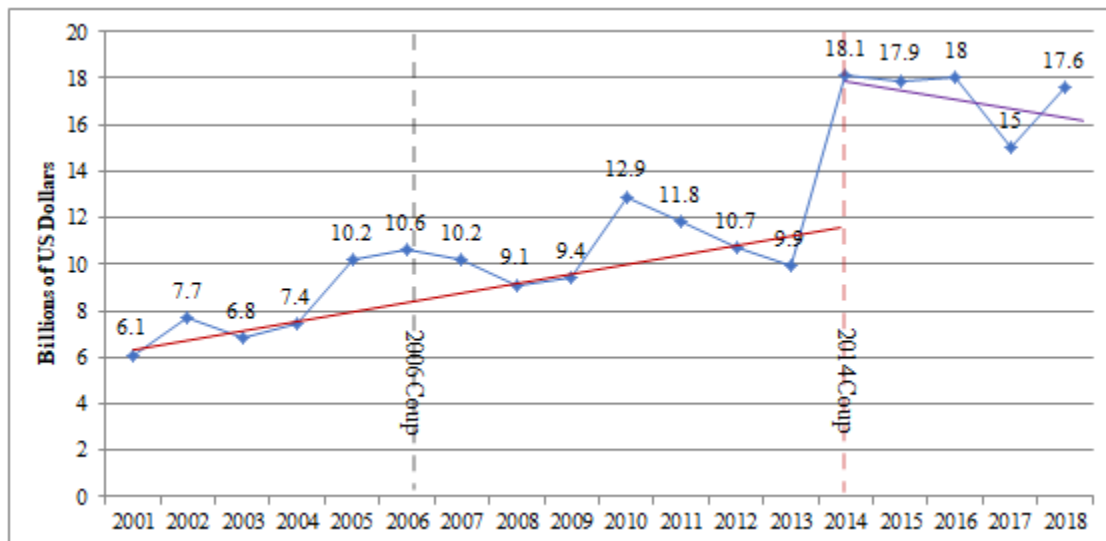
²⁹⁷ Anuchit Nguyen, "Trump to Suspend Thailand's \$1.3 Billion Trade Preferences," *Bloomberg*, October 26, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-26/trump-scraps-thailand-s-1-3-billion-trade-preferences-on-labor>.

²⁹⁸ USBEA, "Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data."

²⁹⁹ Jon Fernquest, "UPDATE: Foreign Investment in Thailand Plunges 78%, Vietnam Sets Record," *Bangkok Post*, January 13, 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/work/823592/update-foreign-investment-in-thailand-plunges-78-vietnam-sets-record>.

³⁰⁰ Tamaki Kyojuka, "Foreign Investment into Thailand Plummets 90% in 2015," *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 15, 2016, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Foreign-investment-into-Thailand-plummets-90-in-2015>; Jon Fernquest, "Foreign Direct Investment Collapses," *Bangkok Post*, August 2, 2016, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/learning/advanced/1050910/foreign-direct-investment-collapses>.

Figure 17. Thailand-U.S. Foreign Direct Investment after the 2014 Coup
(2014–2018)³⁰¹



What is most remarkable is the sharp rise in U.S. FDI into Thailand between 2013 and 2014. After averaging \$8 billion during the Thaksin years of 2001–06 and \$10.5 billion from 2007–13 after the 2006 coup, 2014 brought an 82 percent gain in FDI to \$18.1 billion, which it basically retained for the next four years barring the slight drip to \$15 billion in 2017.³⁰² An anticipated change in Thailand’s investment policies helps explain this surge.

The Thai government revised its foreign investment rules in January 2015. Toward the end of 2014, U.S. companies, supported by the U.S. government, and along with other foreign investors and companies, rushed to file investment applications to receive better tax and other benefits under the existing system.³⁰³ In 2015, Thailand reduced benefits for investors, including cutting the number of industries qualifying for tax benefits by 20 percent, mainly in labor-intensive sectors in the midst of rising labor costs and growing

³⁰¹ Data shows U.S. direct investment position abroad on a historical-cost basis. USBEA, “Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data” data available through 2018.

³⁰² USBEA, “Balance of Payments and Direct Investment Position Data.”

³⁰³ Kyozuka, “Foreign Investment into Thailand Plummets 90% in 2015.”

worker shortages.³⁰⁴ As noted above, U.S. FDI in Thailand has not varied much since the initial surge in 2014 that locked in previous, more-favorable conditions.

Despite Thailand's less-favorable investment policies implemented in 2015, in 2016, the United States published a statement acknowledging Thailand as an "upper middle-income country with pro-investment policies ... [where] hundreds of U.S. companies have invested in Thailand successfully."³⁰⁵ This statement was timely and much needed by Thailand, given that, in the first six months of 2016, overall FDI in Thailand fell more than 90 percent.³⁰⁶ The drop was due to uncertainty regarding Thai politics and economics in the wake of the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thailand's longest reigning king, who was known for his pro-West policies. The U.S. statement came at a time when Thailand desperately needed its ally's support. The U.S. government and businesses likely were also aware that Thailand had become the largest economy in ASEAN, second only to Indonesia.³⁰⁷

Yet, in 2017, Thailand saw U.S. FDI fall to \$15 billion from \$18 billion in 2015.³⁰⁸ This mild decline may have been a result of what James Zhan described as a worldwide "underlying FDI trend [that] has shown anemic growth since the global financial crisis and has been on a downward trajectory since 2013."³⁰⁹ Zhan qualifies this assessment in stating that Southeast Asia remains the main growth engine for FDI and continues to attract foreign investors, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand. Indeed, Thailand became the third-fastest growing recipient of FDI from the United States in 2018. U.S. FDI in Thailand increased 17.3 percent from \$15 billion in 2017 to \$17.6 billion in 2018.³¹⁰

³⁰⁴ Kyojuka, "Foreign Investment into Thailand Plummets 90% in 2015."

³⁰⁵ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, "2016 Investment Climate Statement."

³⁰⁶ Ate Hoekstra, "King's Death Compounds Economic Uncertainty in Thailand," *DW*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.dw.com/en/kings-death-compounds-economic-uncertainty-in-thailand/a-36089870>.

³⁰⁷ "Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): Thailand," Select USA, December 2019, <https://www.selectusa.gov/servlet/servlet.FileDownload?file=015t0000000LM1F>.

³⁰⁸ Select USA, "Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): Thailand."

³⁰⁹ "Global Foreign Investment Flows Dip to Lowest Levels in a Decade," UNCTAD, January 21, 2019, <https://unctad.org/en/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=1980>.

³¹⁰ Select USA, "Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): Thailand."

In sum, from 2014 to 2018, the United States invested an average of \$17 billion to Thailand, miles ahead of its FDI there from 2001–2013 that averaged \$9.4 billion. Lastly, despite there not being data available on 2019 U.S. FDI in Thailand at the time of this report, the *Investing in ASEAN Report for 2019 to 2020* speaks to Thailand’s ongoing push to attract even more FDI, especially with it being the ASEAN Chair for 2019.³¹¹ The report looks to the United States to be one of the growing investors.

3. U.S. Development Assistance to Projects in Thailand: 2014–2019

The 2014 coup gravely affected U.S. development assistance to Thailand from 2014 to 2018 where the amount of funding began a periodic decline with downward trends (see Figure 18 and blue line representing the trend).³¹² Development assistance through USAID peaked in 2016 at \$5.1 million, a 54 percent increase from \$3.3 million in 2015. This was due to USAID extending disaster and risk reduction support to Thailand in preparation for flooding and other disasters.³¹³ By 2017, U.S. development assistance declined by 31 percent to \$3.5 million although the U.S. Department of State did provide funding in 2017 for technical assistance to the USTDA regional office in Bangkok.³¹⁴ Technical assistance, as defined by USTDA, “offers assessments, recommendations and technical support to meet industry requirements and to seek implementation financing.”³¹⁵ So while the economic assistance does not go directly toward development projects, it still aids in the support and planning portion of such projects, thereby indicting the importance Washington still places on its relationship with its ally. Similarly, the USTDA 2018 Annual

³¹¹ “Investing in ASEAN 2019–2020,” ASEAN, accessed December 16, 2019, <https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/Investing-in-ASEAN-20192020-App.pdf>.

³¹² USAID, “U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017.”

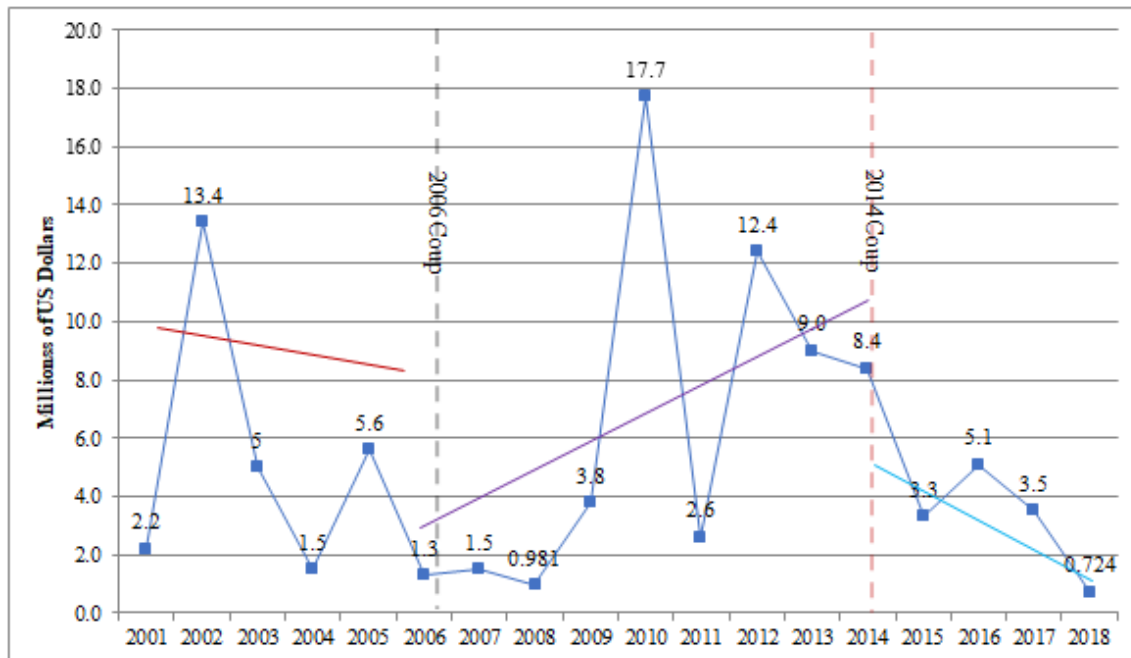
³¹³ Richard Nyberg, “United States Extends Disaster Risk Reduction Support to Thailand,” USAID, February 16, 2017, <https://www.usaid.gov/asia-regional/press-releases/feb-16-2017-united-states-extends-disaster-risk-reduction-support>.

³¹⁴ U.S. Trade and Development Agency, *USTDA Annual Report 2017* (Arlington, VA: USTDA, 2017), <https://www.ustda.gov/sites/default/files/USTDA%202017%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

³¹⁵ USTDA, *USTDA Annual Report 2017*, 3.

Report stated that the U.S. Department of State also provided aid at \$724,620 for the same reasons in 2017.

Figure 18. U.S. Development Assistance to Projects in Thailand after the 2014 Coup (2014–2019)³¹⁶



Nevertheless, the United States was not keen to continue providing development assistance in the years immediately following the 2014 coup. Unlike the 2006 coup, where the junta soon returned control to civilian leaders, Prayut consolidated power until his election in 2019. As a result, Washington adhered to U.S. law and did not provide development assistance through the USTDA from 2014 to 2016.³¹⁷ Yet, development aid returned in 2017, even before elections were called for 2019. This change may be the result of a shift in policies between the Obama and Trump administrations, where the latter has

³¹⁶ USAID and USTDA Obligations are in constant 2017 dollars.

³¹⁷ USAID, “U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2017.”

fewer qualms working with authoritarian governments.³¹⁸ In contrast, rather than cutting development assistance after the coup, China offered over \$3 billion in aid and loans to Thailand and other regional countries to improve infrastructure.³¹⁹

Still, it was not until August 12, 2019, and after Thailand's March 2019 elections that the USTDA finally issued a press release indicating that it will reopen its program in Thailand.³²⁰ The goal was to support "the development of priority infrastructure projects in the energy, transportation, and telecommunications sectors, and helping to foster new commercial partnerships between the United States and Thailand." Additionally, the USTDA awarded a grant—but with no disclosed monetary amount—to Thailand's Blue Solar Company, a renewable energy enterprise, to assist in the development of a solar photovoltaic (PV) power plant containing an integrated energy storage system in the northwest province of Suphan Buri. The USTDA's decision to formally reopen its programs to Thailand signals renewed efforts at strengthening Thailand-U.S. economic relations.³²¹ The USTDA's decision to resume economic development support to Thailand is also interpreted as Washington's move to counter Beijing's influence in Southeast Asia.³²²

4. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Economic Relations after the 2014 Coup

The state of Thailand-U.S. economic relations under the Prayut administration is worse compared to that of previous administrations in all measurable aspects. In terms of total bilateral trade, relations continued to strength between 2014 and 2019. U.S. FDI to Thailand, however, soared from \$9.9 billion in 2013 to \$18.1 billion in 2014 and remained within this high average minus the slight decline to \$15 billion in 2017. There remains

³¹⁸ "ASG Analysis: Thailand's Prime Minister Visits the U.S.," Albright Stone Bridge, September 29, 2017, <https://www.albrightstonebridge.com/news/asg-analysis-thailands-prime-minister-visits-us>.

³¹⁹ "Chinese President Xi Meets Thai PM Prayuth," VOA, December 23, 2014, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/chinese-president-xi-meets-thai-pm-prayuth>.

³²⁰ "USTDA Reopens in Thailand," USTDA, August 12, 2019, <https://ustda.gov/news/press-releases/2019/ustda-reopens-thailand>.

³²¹ "US Resumes Cooperation with Thai Private Sector," *Nation*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nationthailand.com/noname/30374764>.

³²² *Nation*, "US Resumes Cooperation with Thai Private Sector."

promise of even greater U.S. FDI in Thailand, considering the Kingdom being the ASEAN Chair for 2019, which may help elevate the Thai government and economy.

Finally, although U.S. development assistance to Thailand through USTDA was negatively impacted most of 2014–17, by 2017, the U.S. government was finding other ways to deliver assistance. Its announcement in August 2019 of the revitalization of U.S. aid programs to Thailand hints at future development projects and funding to the Kingdom, especially under the current U.S. administration, which puts less emphasis on regime type, and with the resumption of Thailand elections. All else equal, while the economic ties between the two countries were initially negatively affected by the 2014 coup, contemporary affairs—even with Prayut limiting democratic expression and institutions—suggest an ongoing strengthening of Thailand-U.S. economic relations.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter assessed and analyzed economic relations organized around three different periods: 2001–06, 2006–14, and 2014–19. During the Thaksin years from 2001 to 2006, Thailand-U.S. total bilateral trade gradually increased, U.S. FDI into Thailand experienced declines in 2003 and 2004 but trended upward otherwise, and U.S. development assistance fluctuated significantly. After the 2006 coup, bilateral trade expanded considerably, and FDI peaked at \$12.9 billion in 2010 before beginning its gradual decline until dramatically increasing to \$18.1 billion in 2014. In contrast, U.S. development assistance was negatively impacted by the 2006 coup, with funding to Thailand suspended for the two years following the coup. Finally, after the 2014 coup until 2019, total bilateral trade continued to increase, U.S. FDI was relatively stable, and U.S. development assistance declined substantially but aid through USTDA was restored informally in 2017 and 2018 and formally in 2019. Assistance via USAID continued throughout.

IV. THAILAND-U.S. DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Compared to Thailand-U.S. military and economic relations, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations were more negatively affected by the 2006 and 2014 coups.³²³ Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations during the Thaksin Administrative period (2001–06) were strong but stagnated in the years after the 2006 coup (2006–14) due to five different Thai prime ministers subsequently leading a troubled country, each without a clear foreign policy. U.S. sanctions and criticisms of Thailand following the 2014 coup negatively affected bilateral ties, which were further exacerbated by Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha retaining his premiership after leading the coup d'état and then government for five years, as opposed to promptly transferring control of the Kingdom to civilian leaders or holding elections. Additionally, U.S. sanctions on Thailand compelled Prayut to cultivate diplomatic ties with other foreign leaders in order to grow the Thai economy and legitimize his rule over the Kingdom, thereby complicating Thailand-U.S. diplomacy even more. However, the October 2, 2017, diplomatic visit between President Donald Trump and Prayut at the White House signaled a normalization of Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties.³²⁴ While overall Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations have stabilized since the 2006 coup, contemporary ties are not as vigorous and strong as they were during the Thaksin years where Thailand's democracy and Thaksin's support for the U.S. global war on terrorism—that ultimately earned Thailand the Major Non-NATO ally status—helped strengthened the alliance.

³²³ Per the U.S. Department of State, this thesis defines diplomacy as “the art and practice of conducting negotiations and maintaining relations between nations ... without arousing hostility” and uses this definition as a reference point for assessing the changes in diplomatic relations from 2001–19. “Diplomatic Dictionary,” U.S. Department of State, accessed November 29, 2019, <https://diplomacy.state.gov/discover-diplomacy/diplomatic-dictionary>.

³²⁴ Murray Hiebert, “Prayuth’s White House Visit Expected to Kick-start Normalization of Thai-U.S. Relations,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 29, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/prayuths-white-house-visit-expected-kick-start-normalization-thai-us-relations>; Pongphisoot Busbarat, *Shopping Diplomacy: The Thai Prime Minister’s Visit to the United States and its Implications for Thai-US Relations*, No. 78 (Singapore: ISEAS, 2017), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_78.pdf.

An analysis of Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations, admittedly, is slightly difficult compared to that of military and economic relations given the lack of quantitative measurements. For example, military and economic ties can be tangibly measured based on, for example, the number of participants in and nature of military exercises, level of equipment sales and financing, trade balances, foreign direct investments, and foreign assistance. Diplomacy, on the other hand, lacks such concrete data. The status of Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations is assessed, instead, on the frequency and nature of official high-level visits between the two countries and official press releases and statements made about each other.

The number of official high-level visits in each period are indicative of Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations. From 2001 to 2006, Thaksin made three diplomatic, working visits to the White House, in 2001, 2003, and 2005, whereas President Bush in the same span made one to Thailand in 2003.³²⁵ There were half as many high-level visits between Thailand and U.S. state leaders during 2007–2014. Bush visited Thailand again in 2008, and President Obama visited the Kingdom in 2012 to meet former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.³²⁶ Prayut’s 2017 visit to the White House remains the sole diplomatic visit between Thailand and U.S. leaders from 2014 to 2019. This chapter proceeds by assessing in more detail the state of Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations prior to the 2006 coup, then analyzing the state of the relations after the 2006 and 2014 coups, respectively.

A. THAILAND-U.S. DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS: THE THAKSIN YEARS (2001–2006)

This section assesses the state of Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations under the Thaksin Shinawatra period based on an analysis of the frequency of high-level diplomatic visits, the nature of the visits and official statements published, and the extent of support the two countries extended one another following each visit. It finds that Thailand-U.S.

³²⁵ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, “A Look Back at U.S. Presidential Visits to Thailand”; “Visits by Foreign Leaders of Thailand,” U.S. Office of the Historian, accessed June 10, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/visits/thailand>.

³²⁶ “President Bush Visits Bangkok, Thailand,” White House, August 7, 2008, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080807-8.html>.

diplomatic relations, by the end of Thaksin's rule, had strengthened considerably—through four high-level diplomatic visits—from their initial disconcerting point that seemed postured for decline. This initial concern stems from Thaksin's critics arguing that Washington was dissatisfied with Thaksin criticizing Western media shortly after ascending to office and his unenthusiastic support of the U.S. global war on terrorism.³²⁷ Critics, moreover, claimed that the Bush Administration did not accord Thaksin's diplomatic visit in December 2001 with the same level as it did the leaders of Malaysia and Indonesia during their visits. This could be interpreted as Washington giving less precedence to its first Asian ally. Yet, Thailand-U.S. diplomacy under the Thaksin Administration was, on the whole satisfactory, and signaled continuity from the previous Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai Administration (1997–2001). Moreover, not only had Thailand-U.S. diplomacy strengthened by the end of Thaksin's rule, it seemed positioned for even greater growth considering, for instance, Thailand-U.S. negotiations of a Free Trade Agreement and enhanced military engagements.

This section is divided into three parts with the first providing a background of Thaksin's initial months in office (February 2001–September 2001) to assess the state of the initial Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties under a new Thai government. It argues that Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations seemed postured for decline because of Thaksin's anti-Western demeanor and favoring of Asian values and diplomatic ties with Asian states. The second part describes the evolution of Thailand-U.S. diplomacy from its initial moderate point to a strengthened one starting with Thaksin's support of the U.S. global war on terrorism, which signaled improved relations that advanced diplomatic ties. Lastly, it concludes with an explanation of the strengthened and well-rounded state of Thailand-U.S. diplomacy by the end of the Thaksin years.

1. Thailand's First Democratically Elected Prime Minister of the 21st Century

Thaksin's early months in office were disconcerting for the United States due to his seemingly anti-Western demeanor and preference for Asian values and the cultivation of

³²⁷ *The Far East and Australia 2003* (London and New York: Europa Publications, 2003).

stronger diplomatic relations with other Asian countries, specifically, China. Thaksin's electoral victory surprised several U.S. politicians who had placed their confidence in the election of Thaksin's predecessor, former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai from the long-standing Democrat Party.³²⁸ Thaksin's ascension was a cause for alarm to many U.S. policymakers given his nationalist overtures, which mirrored those of Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad, who was well-known for his 1980s "Look East Policy."³²⁹ Mahathir launched this policy in February 1982 as an economic reform initiative to encourage Malaysians to emulate Japanese business management skills and work ethic—as opposed to mirroring Western work ethic—in order to grow Malaysia's economy as remarkably as Japan did after World War II.³³⁰ In essence, Mahathir believed that Japanese economic growth was predicated on its superior morale, management capability, and labor ethics, which he viewed as a solid foundation for Asian self-reliance. Such a shift in Thailand via Thaksin's echoing of Mahathir's policy would likely weaken the Thailand-U.S. alliance.

From the onset, Thaksin's speech to the Thai National Assembly in February 2001 echoed this Look East Policy. He announced a foreign policy of "proactive economic diplomacy... by expanding closer international cooperation and relations between ASEAN member countries and countries in East Asia, South Asia, and other regions."³³¹ While it would be premature to signal this as a direct distancing from the United States, Thaksin's initial actions did not assuage concerns. Kavi Chongkittavorn proclaims that "when Thaksin came to power, he started...standing up to the United States [and was] the first

³²⁸ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*; McCargo and Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*.

³²⁹ McCargo and Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*.

³³⁰ Saiful Bahari Ahmad, "Malaysia-Japan Relations after 25 Years of 'Look East Policy'," *Asian View* (2007): 46–47, <https://www.jef.or.jp/journal/pdf/154AsianView.pdf>; McCargo and Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand*.

³³¹ Thaksin Shinawatra, *Policy of the Government of Thailand* (Bangkok, Thailand: 2001), 15, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan003004.pdf>.

prime minister to have such a relationship with the United States.”³³² However, it is necessary to note that notwithstanding Thaksin’s rhetoric, he was not significantly different in practice from his predecessors. Former Thai leaders, especially those from the Vietnam War era, valued a strong Thailand-U.S. military alliance and close economic and diplomatic relationships to defeat shared communist threats.³³³ Such leaders facilitated strong support for the Thailand-U.S. alliance by hosting large numbers of U.S. military personnel and equipment on Thai soil and deploying Thai military forces to fight alongside U.S. troops in South Vietnam in exchange for U.S. military and economic aid.³³⁴ The need for this alliance would resurface after the 9/11 attacks with Thaksin seeking U.S. economic assistance in exchange for the Kingdom’s support in the war on terrorism.

Furthermore, Thaksin’s early actions on China were concerning for Washington policymakers. In April 2001, when China forced the United States to land a U.S. EP-3 spy plane on Hainan, China, Thaksin irked Washington when he refused to side with his U.S. ally and instead sought a mediator role in the conflict.³³⁵ In an interview addressing whether he was leaning toward China over the United States, Thaksin claimed neutrality by stating that Thailand and China enjoy long ancestral ties, while the United States remains an old and enduring ally.³³⁶ Specifically, as quoted in Gaye Christoffersen’s article, Thaksin remarked that “[e]conomically, China [is] also a big market and Thailand

³³² Marwaan Macan-Markar, “Politics-Thailand: Premier’s Visit to Measure Ties with U.S,” *Inter Press Service News Agency*, May 22, 2003, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2003/05/politics-thailand-premiers-visit-to-measure-ties-with-us/>.

³³³ Kislenko, “A Not So Silent Partner: Thailand’s Role in Covert Operations, Counter-Insurgency, and the Wars in Indochina,” 6-7.

³³⁴ Hojung Do, *Varieties of Patron-Client State Relationship: The U.S. and Southeast Asia* (Seoul, South Korea: Ewha Womans University), <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/AP%20Hong%20Kong%202016/Archive/d1e66ca2-b3a1-4437-bc79-d6912a7feff6.pdf>.

³³⁵ Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?” 464; Medeiros, *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China’s Rise*.

³³⁶ Gaye Christoffersen, “The Role of East Asia in Sino-American Relations,” *Asian Survey* 42, no. 3 (2002): 369–96, doi:10.1525/as.2002.42.3.369.

must have a good relationship with her. As for the U.S., Thailand has been an old ally, and this relationship will continue.”³³⁷ It appeared Thaksin was hedging.

Still, Washington became more disenchanted when, in the following month, Thaksin met with Chinese officials in Hong Kong and obtained \$2 billion in Chinese economic aid for Thailand.³³⁸ Thaksin was adamant that China’s growing economy necessitated cultivating Sino-Thai ties, which could be viewed as bandwagoning with the rising power were it not for Thaksin also maintaining diplomatic relations with the United States in hopes of reaping strategic and economic benefits as well.³³⁹ Even so, Thaksin’s statements during his high-level diplomatic visit with Chinese State Council Premier Zhu Rongji in August 2001 still gave cause for alarm in the initial months into his premiership. Thaksin proclaimed that “as the current prime minister, I am most enthusiastic to further expand the Thailand-China relationship in all areas.... I do not see anything that will be an obstacle to Thailand-China relations [and] ... in terms of economic cooperation and trade, Thailand and China can be mutually complementary.”³⁴⁰

2. 9/11 and the U.S. War on Terrorism: Thailand’s Alignment with the United States

Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations vacillated from concerning to potentially declining to eventually robust a few years after the 9/11 attacks. Ties strengthened when Thaksin eventually committed Thailand’s support to the U.S. global war on terrorism campaign. Despite Thaksin’s eventual support of the U.S. war campaign, he did not do so without initial hesitation and resistance. This was mainly due to Thaksin’s desire to not

³³⁷ An aggregate search of the primary source as listed in Christoffersen’s article and on open source media yielded no results. Thaksin Shinawatra, *Bangkok Post*, June 5, 2001, quoted in Christoffersen, “The Role of East Asia in Sino-American Relations,” 381.

³³⁸ Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?” 464.

³³⁹ Chulacheeb Chinwanno, “Rising China and Thailand’s Policy of Strategic Engagement,” in *The Rise of China: Responses from Southeast Asia and Japan*, edited by Jun Tsunekawa, The National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, 25, http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/joint_research/series4/pdf/4-Cover.pdf; Chambers, ““The Chinese and the Thais are Brothers’: The Evolution of the Sino-Thai Friendship,” 600.

³⁴⁰ An aggregate and systemic search of Thaksin making similar statements regarding Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations yield no results. “Thaksin: Enhancing Sino-Thai Ties, Will of Every Thai Leader,” *China*, August 2001, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2001/Aug/18145.htm>.

provoke the large Muslim-Malay Thai citizens in Thailand's southern provinces, his plans to strengthen ties with the Middle East, and his eagerness to move Thailand toward a more neutral foreign-policy posture.³⁴¹

On September 14, 2001—when the United States was reeling from the 9/11 attacks and needing reassurance—Thaksin announced Thailand's "strictly neutral" policy toward the U.S. global war on terrorism.³⁴² Thaksin's Deputy Prime Minister Thammarak Isarangkul na Ayuthaya echoed Thaksin's sentiments by explaining that Bangkok did not want to help perpetuate the war or become vulnerable to foreign terrorists.³⁴³ Yet, during Thaksin's first of three diplomatic visit to the White House in December 14, 2001, he affirmed to President Bush that the two countries' needed to strengthen their strategic and economic engagements and promised Bangkok's support for the war on terrorism.³⁴⁴ Following the meeting, the U.S. Office of the Press Secretary released a statement boasting a title of "Prime Minister of Thailand Reiterates Full Support to U.S." to arguably highlight the significance of Thaksin's remarks.³⁴⁵ Shortly thereafter, Thaksin offered five medical teams and the use of a Thai military engineering battalion to U.S. reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.³⁴⁶ But, it took Thaksin two years to follow through with these commitments and go public about Thailand's membership in the U.S.' "coalition of the willing" for Iraq.

In October 2001, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit Meeting in Shanghai, President Bush had announced the 9/11 attacks as "an attack on all

³⁴¹ Chachavalpongpun, *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy*.

³⁴² Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 465.

³⁴³ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 465-66.

³⁴⁴ "Prime Minister of Thailand Reiterates Full Support to U.S.," White House, December 14, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011214-5.html>; Thaphiphon Suporn, "Recalling Thaksin's Perception Shinawatra Following the War on Terror: The Return of the Late Bangkok-Washington relations in 9/11," *Social Sciences Journal* 9, no. (2013): 53-79, http://www.jssnu.socsci.nu.ac.th/uploads/journal/2015_02_13_16_17_32.pdf; U.S. Office of the Historian, "Visits by Foreign Leaders of Thailand."

³⁴⁵ White House, "Prime Minister of Thailand Reiterates Full Support to U.S."

³⁴⁶ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 466-67.

civilized countries.”³⁴⁷ While there, he met with and gained the committed support in the U.S. global war on terrorism from Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. But it would take until the 2002 APEC meeting for Thailand to express similar support at such high-profile forums. In October 2002, Thailand supported the APEC Counterterrorism Declaration, just a few months after the Kingdom had signed an ASEAN-sponsored counterterrorism Declaration of Cooperation with the United States.³⁴⁸

Yet, the next year, as the Bush Administration was making preparations to invade Iraq on March 20, 2003, Thaksin implored Washington to not publicly declare the Kingdom as a part of the “coalition of the willing.”³⁴⁹ This was unexpected, because Thaksin had already allowed the United States to stage U.S. warplanes heading to Iraq at the geostrategic U-tapao airbase and controversially permitting the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to conduct torture-infused interrogations of suspected Al-Qaeda operatives in Thailand in early 2002.³⁵⁰ After *CNN* revealed Thailand as a silent partner in this rendition scheme, which may have violated international law, Thaksin neither confirmed nor denied the story.³⁵¹ Also according to Chambers, Thaksin’s ambiguity was founded on the hope of avoiding criticism from the Thai-Muslim lobby in Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai (TRT) political party, which opposed any and all U.S. military actions against Muslim-majority countries. Likewise, Thaksin feared provoking a terrorist attack on Thai soil, which would damage the economy’s critical tourism sector should he adopt a foreign policy that acquiesced too publicly to U.S. demands in the war on terrorism campaign.³⁵²

³⁴⁷ U.S. Office of the Historian, “The United States and the Global Coalition Against Terrorism, September 2001–December 2003.”

³⁴⁸ Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?” 467.

³⁴⁹ Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?” 467.

³⁵⁰ Shashank Bengali and Chris Megerian, “The CIA Closed its Original ‘Black Site’ Years Ago. But its Legacy of Torture Lives on in Thailand,” *LA Times*, April 22, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-thailand-cia-haspel-2018-htmlstory.html>.

³⁵¹ Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?” 467.

³⁵² Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?” 468.

By early June 2003, these mixed signals and Thaksin's unofficial visit to Washington had prompted the Bush Administration to question the sincerity of Thaksin's diplomatic support for counterterrorism war efforts.³⁵³ The administration relied on Thailand as part of a forward-positioning defense strategy where U.S. forces could preposition their armaments on Thai soil for rapid force-deployment purposes, making access to the U-tapao airbase strategically important.³⁵⁴ Washington hoped that Bangkok, moreover, would become a key intelligence-sharing ally during the war.

Thaksin eventually accepted that other countries—including Asian nations such as the self-proclaimed pacifist Japan and neighboring India and China, neither of which are U.S. allies—supported the U.S.-led campaign.³⁵⁵ Combined with backlash from Thai elites that Thaksin's neutrality on the war would jeopardize the Thailand-U.S. alliance, Thaksin felt compelled to officially announce Thailand's support in the war on terrorism.³⁵⁶ In doing so, he set Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations on the path to strengthen considerably.

Thaksin's decision to finally support the U.S. war on terrorism is also attributable to his national interest in the gains Thailand would make strategically, economically, and politically by helping its American ally. For one, the United States would train Thai military forces and provide access to U.S. military equipment.³⁵⁷ In mid-2003, Thaksin revealed that his government needed to rid Thailand of elements of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorist group that was operating in Thailand, albeit to a limited

³⁵³ Chambers, "Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?" 468.

³⁵⁴ Raymond Bonner, "Threats and Responses: Southeast Asia; Thailand Tiptoes in Step with the American Antiterror Effort," *New York Times*, July 8, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/08/world/threats-responses-southeast-asia-thailand-tiptoes-step-with-american-antiterror.html>.

³⁵⁵ Shirley Kan, *U.S.-China Counter-Terrorism Cooperation: Issues for U.S. Policy*, No. RS21995 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2004), <https://fas.org/irp/crs/RS21995.pdf>; Afroz Ahmad and Najish, *Before and After 9/11: Indo-U.S. Counterterrorism Cooperation* (India: Centre for Security Studies), <https://www.lindenwood.edu/files/resources/127-138-before-and-after-9-11.pdf>; Paul Midford, *Japanese Public Opinion and the War on Terrorism: Implications for Japan's Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: East-West Center Washington, 2006), <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/system/tdf/private/PS027.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=32163>.

³⁵⁶ *Joint Force Quarterly*, 2007, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-45.pdf>.

³⁵⁷ Medeiros et al., *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China's Rise*.

extent.³⁵⁸ He later officially committed to the U.S. “coalition of the willing in Iraq” by deploying 443 Thai troops to Iraq for a year—starting in September 2003—to assist in the country’s rebuilding efforts.³⁵⁹ In return, Bush designated Thailand as a Major Non-NATO Ally, thereby giving Thailand greater access to used U.S. military equipment and sales and significantly boosting its diplomatic status.³⁶⁰ By June 2004, Thaksin and Bush commenced negotiations for a Thailand-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. With Thailand now a strong, visible supporter of the U.S. war on terrorism, the Bush Administration was largely mute about growing human rights abuses in Thailand, including Thaksin’s “war on drugs” campaign against illegal trafficking of narcotics, resulting in mass extrajudicial killings in 2003.³⁶¹ When Thailand acceded to Washington’s request to exempt U.S. citizens in Thailand from prosecution in the International Criminal Court, Thailand-U.S. diplomacy was further strengthened. These events showcase that, despite early concerns that Thaksin was distancing Thailand from the United States, he valued the resources, status, and leniency gained through Thailand-U.S. cooperation. Thus, after the 9/11 attacks, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations improved significantly and removed concerns about a weakening alliance.

3. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Diplomatic Relations during the Thaksin Years

Thailand-U.S. diplomacy during the Thaksin years began at a moderate and slightly uncertain level in early 2001 but progressed to an impressive, mutually beneficial, and close alliance by the time of Thaksin’s ousting in September 2006. In fact, prior to the coup, during Bush and Thaksin’s final diplomatic meeting on September 19, 2005, the two reflected on their diplomatic ties and hailed their countries’ alliance as a “special and

³⁵⁸ Medeiros et al., *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China’s Rise*.

³⁵⁹ Medeiros et al., *Pacific Currents: The Responses of U.S. Allies and Security Partners in East Asia to China’s Rise*; Prangtip Daoruend and Heather Abbott, “An Alliance Gone Bad,” Center for Public Integrity, November 20, 2017, <https://publicintegrity.org/national-security/an-alliance-gone-bad/>.

³⁶⁰ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593; Chambers, “Thailand-U.S. Relations after 9/11: A New Era in Cooperation?”

³⁶¹ “Thailand’s ‘War on Drugs,’” Human Rights Watch, March 12, 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/03/12/thailands-war-drugs#>; Daoruend and Abbott, “An Alliance Gone Bad.”

enduring bond.”³⁶² Bush bestowing the Major Non-NATO Ally title on Thailand in October 2003 contributed significantly to moving the two countries’ diplomatic trajectory toward stronger levels. The United States had gained flexibility in how it conducted its global war on terrorism, and Thaksin had gained less U.S. scrutiny on his heavy-handed approach to governance. For one, Thaksin’s authorization of over 3,000 extrajudicial killings in his “war on drugs” campaign and the deaths of 85 Malay-Muslim Thai peaceful protestors who were suffocated in Army trucks during the 2004 Tak Bai incident evoked staunch condemnation from the United Nations Human Rights Committee and Human Rights Watch.³⁶³ Yet, in spite of these egregious acts, the United States publicly responded with, “we have discussed this matter with the Thai and expressed our concerns.”³⁶⁴ This underscores the point that in times of crisis and mutually benefiting and strategic needs, such as that of the war on terrorism, the United States is willing to set aside certain pillars of democracy in favor of national interest.³⁶⁵

B. THAILAND-U.S. DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS: AFTER THE 2006 COUP (2006–2014)

Compared to Thailand-U.S. military and economic relations after the coup, the two countries’ diplomatic relations from 2006 to 2014 were affected substantially and negatively. Specifically, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties after the coup can be considered utilitarian—to further economic and strategic objectives—but diplomacy, as measured by the number and nature of diplomatic visits and official statements between Thailand and the United States, did not progress. The 2006 coup, likewise, complicated Thailand-U.S. relations, since it compelled the United States to vocalize its disappointment toward the

³⁶² “Joint Statement Between President Bush and Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra,” U.S. Department of State, September 19, 2005, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050919-3.html>.

³⁶³ Human Rights Watch, “Thailand’s ‘War on Drugs’.”

³⁶⁴ “U.S. Interests and Policy Priorities in Southeast Asia,” U.S. Department of State, March 26, 2003, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2003/19086.htm>.

³⁶⁵ Regilme, Jr., “Does U.S. Foreign Aid Undermine Human Rights? The “Thaksinification” of the War on Terror Discourses and the Human Rights Crisis in Thailand, 2001 to 2006.”

formerly democratic Thailand, as well as required Washington to impose sanctions in accordance with U.S. law.³⁶⁶

Overall, the most visible ramification of the coup on Thailand-U.S. diplomacy was the dearth of official high-level diplomatic visits between Thailand and U.S. state leaders to each other's country. Compared to the Thaksin years where there were four diplomatic visits (Thaksin in 2001, 2003, and 2005; Bush in 2003), only two U.S. presidents visited Thailand between the September 19, 2006, coup and May 22, 2014, coup: Bush's visit in 2008 and Obama's visit in 2012.³⁶⁷ Both were criticized as too late in closing the chasm that the coup created between Thailand and the United States, a gap which was exacerbated by China's growing influence in the region.³⁶⁸ Worse, as the Albright Stonebridge Group (ASG) chaired by Ambassador Madeleine K. Albright reported, no Thai prime ministers visited the White House from late-2006 to mid-2014, despite a return to elections in 2007.³⁶⁹ ASG notes that the majority of visits between Bangkok and Washington during this time were between their respective policymakers and military leaders, not by the state leaders. As the subsequent analysis, organized by Thai prime minister, will show, these meetings—with the exception of one with Obama and Yingluck in 2012—culminated in greater challenges to Thailand-U.S. diplomacy from 2006 to 2014 due to the lack of consistent, high-level visits.

1. Surayud Chulanont, October 2006 to January 2008

Former Royal Thai Army Commander Surayud Chulanont was appointed as the interim prime minister of Thailand on October 1, 2006.³⁷⁰ During his 15-month tenure as prime minister, Thailand-U.S. diplomacy waxed and waned with the United States blurring the line between political and military relations. On the one hand, U.S. Department of State

³⁶⁶ Section 7008 of the H.R.2855, the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act.

³⁶⁷ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, "A Look Back at U.S. Presidential Visits to Thailand"; White House, "President Bush Visits Bangkok, Thailand."

³⁶⁸ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

³⁶⁹ Albright Stone Bridge, "ASG Analysis: Thailand's Prime Minister Visits the U.S."

³⁷⁰ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593.

Deputy Spokesman Tom Casey promptly expressed on behalf of the Bush Administration his extreme disappointment with the 2006 coup, urged a quick restoration of democracy via election, and warned of U.S. repercussions.³⁷¹ On the other hand, U.S. officials were aware of the strategic importance of the Thailand-U.S. military alliance and cooperation through COBRA GOLD and the International Military and Education Training programs, but, nevertheless, had to enforce sanctions to these programs in accordance with U.S. law.³⁷² They were also cautious not to overly criticize Thailand lest doing so should drive a deep wedge between these long-term allies. U.S. Ambassador Ralph Boyce, the first foreign diplomat to meet Surayud shortly after he became prime minister, was keen on highlighting the optimistic conversation the two had in October 2006.³⁷³ When asked about the meeting, Boyce stated that he felt assured of Surayud's intentions to swiftly return Thailand to a democratically elected government and, in the meantime, protect civil liberties. Yet, Washington still struggled to balance its political and strategic interests.

Over time, U.S. officials' visits and economic assistance to Thailand dwindled.³⁷⁴ For instance, one may think that former President George H.W. Bush's visit to Thailand in December 2006 at the behest of his son—then President George W. Bush—may be indicative of the United States' attempt at reinvigorating Thailand-U.S. diplomacy, such was not the case. Granted, Bush Sr. visited Thailand to pledge U.S. continued support for the tsunami relief aid following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami attack.³⁷⁵ This visit echoed Secretary of State Colin Powell's and Florida Governor Jeb Bush's visits to Thailand in January 2005 for the same purpose.³⁷⁶ Yet, it was not until 2008, two years after the coup,

³⁷¹ *Bangkok Post*, "United States: Thai Coup 'Unjustified'."

³⁷² Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593.

³⁷³ "Thailand: Thailand's newly appointed Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont Starts Work," *Reuters*, October 2, 2006, <https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/500138>.

³⁷⁴ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

³⁷⁵ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, "History of the U.S. and Thailand"; "Thailand Bush Sr," *AP Archive*, December 12, 2006, <http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/b00dc1d955e11b1dd9105185314a7e25>.

³⁷⁶ "Powell, U.S. Team to Survey Tsunami Damage," *CNN*, January 3, 2005, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/01/03/powell/index.html>.

that the United States reinstated economic assistance and military aid to Thailand, signaling efforts to improve Thailand-U.S. interwoven diplomatic and strategic ties.³⁷⁷

2. Samak Sundaravej, January 2008 to September 2008, and Somchai Wongsawat, September 2008 to December 2008

Neither the governments of Prime Ministers Samak Sundaravej nor Somchai Wongsawat were long lived, and nor did they contribute to restoring Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties. Rather, such ties ebbed and flowed between stagnation and decline from January 2008 to December 2008. This is largely attributable to the lack of continuity in Thailand's prime ministers and their need to focus on consolidating power and governing in the wake of ongoing unrest. Samak was the democratically elected prime minister from the December 2007 Thai election, who ran under the People's Power Party banner, the successor to Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai political party, which had been banned by the courts. Samak was widely regarded as Thaksin's "puppet," a term that he resented, despite being unabashed in vocalizing his close ties to the deposed prime minister.³⁷⁸ Somchai is Thaksin's brother-in-law. Thaksin chose Somchai as his successor when the Thai Constitutional Court forced Samak to resign in September 2008 due to a constitutional technicality after hosting a televised cooking show for which he received payment.³⁷⁹ Somchai, too, was forced to resign after a violent clash in October 2008 between the anti-Thaksin, urban middle-class royalist People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), aka Yellow Shirts, and the pro-Thaksin, predominantly rural and poor working-class United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), aka Red Shirts, resulted in one casualty and widespread property damage.

In comparing Thailand-U.S. diplomacy during these two governments, there seems to have been more of a relationship under the Samak Administration than the Somchai Administration, since the latter was so short-lived and reflected nepotism. U.S. officials' visits to Thailand during the Samak administration were strategically conducted following

³⁷⁷ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

³⁷⁸ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. RL32593.

³⁷⁹ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

his democratic election to indicate Washington's support of a democratic Thailand. But the visits appeared to be more of a political formality than genuine, concrete efforts at restoring ties and supporting Thailand during its time of need.

Soon after Samak was elected to office, U.S. Ambassador Eric G. John assumed duties as the U.S. Ambassador to Thailand in February 2008. Upon his arrival to the Kingdom, he announced the U.S. Secretary of State's decision to re-instate military assistance to Thailand, which indicates the strategic importance of Thailand-U.S. military relations over that of sustained diplomatic visits and dialogue.³⁸⁰ A few weeks later, Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Christopher R. Hill, arrived in Thailand and delivered an encouraging speech at Chulalongkorn University, one of Thailand's oldest and most prestigious educational institutions. Hill stated:

We value our relationship with Thailand. We want to do more. As you know, the Prime Minister had a good discussion on the phone with our President when he took over, when he took office. We look forward to really working with Thailand—with the understanding that we work with the government here, we also work with educational institutions, we work with economic [sic], with companies commercially. We work really across the board. We want to make sure this relationship with Thailand is very broad and very deep.³⁸¹

On June 1, 2008, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates' visit with Samak was reaffirmation that "the military-to-military relationship between the U.S. and Thailand is based on shared democratic principles."³⁸² In addition to expressing interest in expanding Thailand-U.S. relations, Gates added that the United States has "no better ally in Asia," but not before remarking that the United States "wants to see democratically elected governments, and...will convey that message."³⁸³ When President Bush visited Samak in August 2008, he, too, championed Thailand's return to democracy and proclaimed that the

³⁸⁰ Royal Thai Embassy in Washington, D.C., "Current Cooperation, 1976–2008."

³⁸¹ Christopher R. Hill, "Remarks at Chulalongkorn University," U.S. Department of State, January 29, 2008, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2008/02/101755.htm>.

³⁸² Miles, "Gates Affirms Democratic Principles During Bangkok Visit."

³⁸³ Miles, "Gates Affirms Democratic Principles During Bangkok Visit."

“United States and Thailand are working to expand freedom with good governance.”³⁸⁴ Although all U.S. officials who visited Thailand boasted the alliance and expressed desires to strengthen ties, it appears that none mentioned concrete actions to further the relationship aside from reinstating military aid. Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations, then, continued falling to the wayside. Additionally, Bush’s 2008 remarks about “America [look]ing to Thailand as a leader in the region and a partner around the world” were simply aspirational, since “it would take more than one election to restore democracy, liberty and law [that] had been under attack since 2001.”³⁸⁵

3. Abhisit Vejjajiva, December 2008 to August 2011

Abhisit Vejjajiva was appointed by the Thai Constitutional Court as Thailand’s prime minister on December 17, 2008. Despite his seemingly pro-Western credentials of being an Oxford alumnus and enjoying close relations with the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, Abhisit and the United States’ newly elected Obama administration were unable to rejuvenate Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties. During Abhisit’s term in office, Thailand-U.S. diplomacy continued stagnating. Abhisit’s administrative makeup and initial efforts by the Obama administration showed potential for restoring Thailand-U.S. diplomacy. Abhisit’s foreign minister, Kasit Piromya, and Finance Minister Korn Chatikavanij were judged as “pro-American,” given their understanding of the alliance and favorable views toward the United States.³⁸⁶ Not counting Abhisit’s defense minister and deputy premier, 34 of his 36 cabinet members were civilians, and, therefore, it was reasonable to infer that Abhisit’s administration would be disposed toward democracy and civilian rule of law, two long-term diplomatic platforms of the United States. For its part, the Obama administration pledged to focus U.S. attention and policymaking on Asia and away from the Middle East. To support this, Obama’s secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, made Asia her first visit abroad

³⁸⁴ “President Bush Meets with Prime Minister Samak of Thailand,” White House, August 6, 2008, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080806-7.html>.

³⁸⁵ White House, “President Bush Visits Bangkok, Thailand”; Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*, 216.

³⁸⁶ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*, 299.

within a month of taking office. This was the first time a U.S. Secretary of State selected Asia as the first destination abroad since Secretary Rusk visited Thailand in 1961.³⁸⁷

But this optimistic view and initial efforts of Thailand-U.S. diplomacy failed to produce tangible results. When Kasit retired as ambassador to the United States in 2005, he joined the pro-establishment, anti-Thaksin PAD. This and Thaksin's continuing efforts to influence Thai politics from exile, compelled Kasit to focus foreign policy more on Thaksin than the United States, let alone Thailand-U.S. diplomacy. As for the United States, Clinton's inaugural trip to Asia in February 2009 was to China, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea—skipping over Thailand, a treaty and MMNA ally.³⁸⁸ When she visited Thailand in July 2009, it was to attend the Asian Regional Forum and not to engage in a bilateral Thailand-U.S. working meeting.³⁸⁹ Similarly, Abhisit's 2009 visit to the United States was primarily to attend the UN General Assembly meeting where he only later engaged with U.S. legislators and business leaders, not President Obama. Only Kasit visited the United States for bilateral talks aimed at strengthening cooperation.³⁹⁰ As for Obama, he did not visit Thailand while traveling to Indonesia in 2010.³⁹¹ For their part, Chinese officials' actions to enhance Sino-Thai diplomacy starkly contrasted with those of Washington. Within months of Abhisit assuming premiership, Beijing canceled Thaksin's scheduled talk at Hong Kong's press club to signal China's support for Thailand's new government.³⁹²

³⁸⁷ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

³⁸⁸ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

³⁸⁹ Dean Yates and Arshad Mohammed, "U.S. Signs ASEAN Treaty, Boosts Engagement," *Reuters*, July 21, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asean-usa/u-s-signs-asean-treaty-boosts-engagement-idUSTRE56L11920090722>.

³⁹⁰ "Foreign Minister Completes His Trip to the United States," Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore, 2010, https://www.thaiembassy.sg/press_media/news-highlights/foreign-minister-completes-his-trip-to-the-united-states.

³⁹¹ U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, "A Look Back at U.S. Presidential Visits to Thailand."

³⁹² Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

4. Yingluck Shinawatra, August 2011 to May 2014

Yingluck, a democratically elected prime minister, fared no better at increasing Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties since her foreign policies toward the United States were mediocre and quite ineffective.³⁹³ Initially, however, there was potential. Under Yingluck's administration, Thailand seemed postured to play a greater role in Obama's "Pivot to Asia" strategy, since, compared to her two immediate predecessors, she was elected as prime minister and not appointed. Moreover, Washington's intention to reinvigorate Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties after her election was apparent in Obama's statements in Bangkok after his reelection in 2012:

Asia is my first foreign trip since our election in the United States, and Thailand is my first stop. And this is no accident.... As I said many times, the United States is and always will be a Pacific nation.... And the cornerstone of our strategy is our strong and enduring treaty alliances, which includes our alliance with Thailand.³⁹⁴

In addition to Obama's remarks, the United States and Thailand revitalized their bilateral ties with the signing of the 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance that envisaged Thailand supporting a U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific and becoming a regional leader within ASEAN.³⁹⁵

³⁹³ Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Yingluck Shinawatra's Foreign Policy," *Asian Sentinel*, January 20, 2012, <https://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/yingluck-shinawatras-foreign-policy/>.

³⁹⁴ "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Shinawatra in a Joint Press Conference," White House, November 18, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/18/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-shinawatra-joint-press-confer>.

³⁹⁵ The 2012 Joint Vision Statement referred to the current "Indo-Pacific" as the "Asia-Pacific." During the Obama administration, "Asia-Pacific" was the term used to refer to U.S. strategic interests in Asia and the Pacific. Since 2017, the incumbent Trump administration has pivoted from referring to region as the "Asia-Pacific" to, instead, the "Indo-Pacific," which better encompasses his U.S. foreign policy strategy toward Asia that includes more active engagement with India. "2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance," U.S. Department of Defense, November 15, 2012, <https://archive.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15685>; Mansura Amdad, "From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific Change of Name or Change of Strategy?" (working paper, Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS) Commentary), <http://bipss.org.bd/pdf/From%20Asia-Pacific%20to%20Indo-Pacific.pdf>.

But critics argued that this was too late.³⁹⁶ Obama's 2012 visit to Thailand was the first from a U.S. president since Bush's visit with Samak in 2008. The bedrock of Thailand-U.S. diplomacy between 2008 and 2012 lay in the two countries' economic and military exchanges. By 2011, Yingluck exacerbated matters further with a catch-all foreign policy toward all international partners aimed at achieving Thai state interests.³⁹⁷ Yingluck sought to "strengthen cooperation and strategic partnerships with countries, groups of countries and international organizations that play important roles in global affairs."³⁹⁸ This blanket foreign policy did little to restore the historically special Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties, which, by the time of her tenure, were lagging behind Sino-Thai diplomacy. Some analysts contend that Yingluck was also incompetent, seeing as she appointed the inexperienced Surapong Tovichakchaikul as the Kingdom's foreign minister.³⁹⁹ This decision, they argue, suggests a lack of care toward foreign affairs and not a specific intent to weaken Thailand-U.S. relations.⁴⁰⁰

The Yingluck government's foreign-affairs performance teetered between success and failure. In 2012, when the United States requested permission for NASA to use the U-tapao airbase for a climate study, Yingluck dwelled on the issue before declining, based on opposition in and out of the parliament.⁴⁰¹ Her close contact with her brother, Thaksin, further compromised continuity in Thai foreign policy.⁴⁰² Yingluck's foreign policy intensified existing imbalances between Thailand's relations with the United States, China, and Japan. While mainland Southeast Asian states began tilting toward China, and

³⁹⁶ Asia Foundation, *America's Role in Asia: The Implications of America's Rebalancing Policy to Asia* (Seoul, Korea: Asia Foundation, 2015), <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/ARAPublication082015.pdf>; Sobia Hanif, *U.S. Rebalancing towards Asia Pacific: Southeast Asia Responds* (Islamabad, Pakistan: National Defence University, 2012), https://ndu.edu.pk/issra/issra_pub/articles/issra-paper/ISSRA_Papers_Vol4_IssueI_2012/08-US-Rebalancing-Sobia-Hanif.pdf.

³⁹⁷ Chachavalpongpun, "Yingluck Shinawatra's Foreign Policy,"

³⁹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Annual Report 2012* (Bangkok, Thailand: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013), <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/contents/files/policy-20130903-140114-733766.pdf>.

³⁹⁹ Pongphisoot Busbarat, "Thailand Under Yingluck: Part II," *World Politics Review*, March 1, 2013, <http://wpr.vu/iaxBR>; Chachavalpongpun, "Yingluck Shinawatra's Foreign Policy,"

⁴⁰⁰ Busbarat, "Thailand Under Yingluck: Part II."

⁴⁰¹ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 257.

⁴⁰² Pongphisoot, "Thailand Under Yingluck: Part II."

maritime states began seeking U.S. security guarantees during the emerging South China Sea crisis, Thailand's posture toward the United States under Yingluck remained conflicted and confused.⁴⁰³

5. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Diplomatic Relations after the 2006 Coup

Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations between September 2006 and May 2014 declined from their positive starting point prior to the 2006 coup. This decline stems largely from the five different prime ministers ruling Thailand during this period who together lacked consistent and clear foreign policy to guide their engagement with foreign powers. Moreover, Bush's visit with Samak in 2008 was more indicative of a formality than a genuine effort to launch concrete policy initiatives. Obama's visit with Yingluck in 2012, while not strictly done for formality purposes, did not significantly strengthen the alliance, notwithstanding the signing of the 2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance. Instead, Obama's visit was part of the United States' overall "Pivot to Asia" foreign policy aimed at countering China's rise in the Indo-Pacific, as well as reasserting the United States as a key leader in Asia.⁴⁰⁴ Finally, while Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties declined relative to the Thaksin years, it is necessary to clarify that they merely stagnated at a low impasse after the 2006 coup. The extent of the two states' diplomacy arguably can be predicated on the state of Thailand-U.S. economic and security relations, since, on the whole, both continued to deepen.

C. THAILAND-U.S. DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS: AFTER THE 2014 COUP (2014–2019)

In the immediate years following the 2014 coup, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties were on the decline before stagnating at another low impasse. Specifically, from 2014 to 2017, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations did not reach the strong and cooperative levels

⁴⁰³ During the July 2012 ASEAN ministerial meeting in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Thailand hesitated on assuming a mediator role over China's territorial disputes in the South China Sea with five other ASEAN countries. Instead, Thailand chose to remain silent on Cambodia's stance, resulting in the meeting concluding without a joint statement for the first time. Busbarat, "Thailand Under Yingluck: Part II."

⁴⁰⁴ Kenneth G. Lieberthal, "The American Pivot to Asia," *Brookings*, December 21, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

seen during the Thaksin-Bush years. However, the diplomatic ties between the two allies were on the mend following Prayut's meeting with Trump in October 2017. A significant contributing factor to the initial decline in Thailand-U.S. diplomacy had to do with Prayut's tight hold on power as the self-appointed prime minister from May 2014 until Thailand's election in March 2019, which returned him to the premiership. With elections delayed, the United States maintained sanctions per U.S. law, and diplomatic relations suffered under the Obama administration as a result. Thus, Trump's invitation for Prayut to visit the White House in 2017 signified the first normalization of Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations since the 2014 coup. That visit, as important as it was, was not the only reason for improvements in Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties.⁴⁰⁵ More likely, a combination of this high-level visit and an announcement of holding Thailand elections in 2019—however delayed they repeatedly were since 2014—helped to stabilize Thailand-U.S. relations.

1. Thailand-U.S. Diplomacy from May 2014 to October 2017

Thailand-U.S. diplomacy from May 2014 to October 2017 continued to falter. Prayut did not take well to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's comments that "there is no justification for this coup.... This act will have negative implications for the Thailand-U.S. relationship, [and] especially our relationship with the Thai military."⁴⁰⁶ Notably, Prayut was unabashed in rebuking the United States' condemnation of his coup, criticizing U.S.-imposed trade sanctions on Thailand and the downsized U.S. participation in the joint-military Cobra Gold exercise.⁴⁰⁷ His rebuke included the argument that military coups and martial law restore political stability and help protect Thai democracy and that there is no single type of democracy. Some argued that, having returned Thailand to military authoritarian rule where elections were continually postponed, Prayut's premiership

⁴⁰⁵ Busbarat, *Shopping Diplomacy: The Thai Prime Minister's Visit to the United States and its Implications for Thai-US Relations*.

⁴⁰⁶ John Kerry, "Coups in Thailand," U.S. Department of State, May 22, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/05/226446.htm>.

⁴⁰⁷ Busbarat, "Thai-U.S. Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 268-69.

reflected a “Thai-style democracy” governed by a royal-military alliance with a heavily conservative political agenda.⁴⁰⁸

This style of “democracy” under Prayut worried U.S. officials who vehemently urged their Thai counterparts to rescind martial law and hold a free and fair election for a prime minister. A month after the coup, Scot Marciel, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary to the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, testified before the U.S. House Committee:

Our interests include the preservation of peace and democracy in Thailand, as well as the continuation of our important partnership with Thailand over the long-term.... [But] the coup and post-coup repression have made it impossible for our relationship with Thailand to go on with ‘business as usual.’⁴⁰⁹

In January 2015, Daniel R. Russel, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, delivered a speech at Chulalongkorn University’s Institute of Security and International Studies in Bangkok that struck a nerve with Prayut. Russel criticized the military government’s lack of inclusiveness in their “political process [that] doesn’t seem to represent all elements of Thai society.”⁴¹⁰ Prayut responded days later with an insistence that Thai democracy continued to prosper and that the 2014 coup reflected a unique case in which the military had to seize power in order to restore democracy after Yingluck’s undemocratic government.⁴¹¹ Prayut argued:

Thai democracy will never die, because I’m a soldier with a democratic heart. I have taken over the power because I want democracy to live on [and] we are building democracy every day... I did not seize power to give money away to this or that person or take it as my own property.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁸ Kongkirati, “Haunted Past, Uncertain Future: The Fragile Transition to Military-Guided Semi-Authoritarianism in Thailand,” 363.

⁴⁰⁹ Scot Marciel, “Thailand: A Democracy at Risk,” U.S. Department of State, June 24, 2014, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2014/06/228368.htm>.

⁴¹⁰ Daniel R. Russel, “Remarks at the Institute of Security and International Studies,” U.S. Department of State, January 26, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2015/01/236308.htm>.

⁴¹¹ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Thai Junta Chief Blasts Top U.S. Diplomat,” *Diplomat*, January 28, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/thai-junta-chief-blasts-top-us-diplomat/>.

⁴¹² Parameswaran, “Thai Junta Chief Blasts Top U.S. Diplomat.”

For about a year, Russel's and Prayut's competing remarks further complicated Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations, with Prayut denying Russel's contention that Prayut's decision to lead the 2014 coup was "politically driven."⁴¹³ Yet, by December 2015, Russel and Prayut changed their positions with Russel declaring to the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs that he had a "very warm reception from Prime Minister Prayut."⁴¹⁴ Russel explained his newfound understanding:

He created an opportunity—and I valued that—for me to engage and share directly with him both our hopes, our goals, and our concerns, both with regards to the political situation in Thailand and the prospect for growing U.S.-Thai cooperation. Now there are a number of areas in which we may not come to agreement. One thing that we do agree on is the importance of the Thai people charting a path to a stable and secure future. That path leads to civilian-led, democratic government.

The U.S. is a friend of Thailand. We stand with the Thai people. We stand with the Thai nation. We want to see Thailand unified, stable, secure, prosperous, and influential, because Thailand has a very important role to play in both [the] region and on the international stage.⁴¹⁵

This change in attitude reflected some of Marciel's initial testimony in June 2015:

At the same time, mindful of our long-term strategic interests, we remain committed to maintaining our enduring friendship with the Thai people and nation, including the military. The challenge facing the United States is to make clear our support for a rapid return to democracy and fundamental freedoms, while also working to ensure we are able to maintain and strengthen this important friendship and our security alliance over the long term.⁴¹⁶

However, despite Thailand and the United States' efforts to maintain their alliance, Thailand-U.S. diplomacy was still strained from 2014 to 2017 because of domestic politics in both Thailand and the United States. In Thailand, because Prayut consolidated power and kept postponing elections until 2019, ostensibly because of the late Thai King

⁴¹³ Parameswaran, "Thai Junta Chief Blasts Top U.S. Diplomat"; Russel, "Remarks at the Institute of Security and International Studies."

⁴¹⁴ Daniel R. Russel, "Press Availability at the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs," U.S. Department of State, December 16, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2015/12/250751.htm>.

⁴¹⁵ Russel, "Press Availability at the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

⁴¹⁶ Marciel, "Thailand: A Democracy at Risk."

Bhumibol Adulyadej's death in October 2016, Thailand remained under soft-authoritarian control.⁴¹⁷ This complicated how Washington could engage its Thai ally, since the 2014 coup "put the U.S. in a dilemma between security goals and principles."⁴¹⁸ Essentially, it would be harder for the United States to use the alliance—let alone praise Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties—as a means to further U.S. strategic purposes the longer Thailand remained under authoritarian rule. As for the United States, domestic politics compounded Thailand-U.S. diplomacy.⁴¹⁹ Washington invited Prayut to attend the ASEAN-U.S. Summit in February 2016 to discuss the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative, but this invitation did little to improve diplomatic relations when Prayut claimed to support the TPP but was reluctant to join. When President Trump ascended to office in 2017, he promptly withdrew the United States from the TPP. Initial efforts at restoring Thailand-U.S. diplomacy, then, were gone.

Finally, consider scholars' observations that "the erratic Prayut... took U.S. admonitions seriously and even personally," which strained Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations from the onset.⁴²⁰ Not only did the heavy Western castigation of the coup anger Prayut and lead him to rebuke U.S. criticism, it also led Prayut's government to seek closer ties with other authoritarian regimes, like China, to help legitimize his regime and government. Significantly, throughout the Kingdom's political unrest and periods of authoritarianism between 2006 and 2019, China did not criticize Thailand's junta.⁴²¹

Between 2014 and 2016, most diplomatic visits between Thailand and the United States ceased, while visits between Thailand and China, comparatively, continued

⁴¹⁷ Busbarat, *Shopping Diplomacy: The Thai Prime Minister's Visit to the United States and its Implications for Thai-US Relations*.

⁴¹⁸ Busbarat, *Shopping Diplomacy: The Thai Prime Minister's Visit to the United States and its Implications for Thai-US Relations*, 4.

⁴¹⁹ Busbarat, *Shopping Diplomacy: The Thai Prime Minister's Visit to the United States and its Implications for Thai-US Relations*.

⁴²⁰ Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," 120.

⁴²¹ Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," 120-122.

unabated.⁴²² It is questionable, though, that Prayut chose to cultivate stronger ties with China at the expense of the United States.⁴²³ Rather, Prayut may have courted diplomatic ties with other state leaders, such as China, because U.S. sanctions constrained the Kingdom's access to military equipment and foreign assistance. While the conditions for a more cooperative Sino-Thai relationship existed well before Prayut came to power, Prayut broke new ground, signing two Memorandums of Understanding (MOU), one for a key rail project and another on agricultural trade products.⁴²⁴ Sino-Thai relations under the junta, then, were about furthering an already well-established relationship, as opposed to deliberately cultivating such ties over that of the Thailand-U.S. alliance.⁴²⁵ Thus, Prayut is not bandwagoning with China, but is hedging between China and the United States with some prioritization of Beijing over Washington, because the latter was slow to recognize the Prayut regime's legitimacy and issued sanctions limiting U.S. economic aid to Thailand.⁴²⁶ Nonetheless, Prayut's courtship with Beijing still negatively strained Thailand-U.S. diplomacy.⁴²⁷

2. Thailand-U.S. Diplomacy under the Trump Administration, 2017–2019

In 2017, Prayut achieved something he was unable to during the Obama Administration: a visit to the White House to meet with the U.S. President, signaling the

⁴²² U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, "A Look Back at U.S. Presidential Visits to Thailand"; U.S. Office of the Historian, "Visits by Foreign Leaders of Thailand."

⁴²³ Amy Sawitta Lefevre and Pracha Hariraksapitak, "Thailand Welcomes China's Li as U.S. Ties Cool Over Coup," *Reuters*, December 18, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-china-idUSKBN0JW2KH20141218>.

⁴²⁴ "Thai-China Rail Project MoU Approved," *Bangkok Post*, November 25, 2014, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/445360/thai-china-rail-project-mou-approved>; "Li Keqiang Meets with Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha of Thailand, Stressing to Join Efforts in Building the China-Thailand Railway and Promote Regional Connectivity," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of North Macedonia, December 19, 2014, <http://mk.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/t1221894.htm>.

⁴²⁵ Storey, *Thailand's Post-Coup Relationships with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington*; Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," 128.

⁴²⁶ Enze Han, "Under the Shadow of China-US Competition: Myanmar and Thailand's Alignment Choices," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 81–104, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pox017>; Murphy, "Beyond Balancing and Bandwagoning: Thailand's Response to China's Rise," 1-27.

⁴²⁷ Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," 128.

normalization of Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations. During Trump and Prayut's meeting, both sang praises about Thailand-U.S. relations, with President Trump declaring that he was hopeful about their "very strong relationship."⁴²⁸ While the outcome of this meeting did not guarantee regular diplomatic meetings or a restoration of diplomatic ties to previous heights, the meeting still marked an improvement in diplomatic relations over the past decade.

The diplomatic relationship between Thailand and the United States has stabilized since Prayut's visit with Trump in 2017, with more efforts made by U.S. officials to increase ties. As reported in the *DOD News*, on February 7, 2018, Marine Corps General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), visited his Thai counterpart, Army General Tarnchaiyan Srisuwan, along with Defense Minister Prawait Wongsuwan and Prime Minister Prayut, in Bangkok, Thailand.⁴²⁹ This meeting marked the first visit by a CJCS to Thailand since 2012, with the 2014 coup having led to cancellation of several high-level engagements between U.S. and Thailand forces. *DoD News* highlighted the significance of Dunford's speech, in which he praised the strong military-to-military relations between the two countries and stated U.S. intent to deepen strategic ties. While military in nature, the stature of the participants carried diplomatic significance as well and indicated growing efforts to further Thailand-U.S. diplomatic dialogue.

Yet, part of Dunford's speech was ambiguous. He proclaimed that the most important aspect of the Thailand-U.S. alliance is that the relationship is based on the countries' mutual contributions to "a rules-based international order for more than 70 years," which includes diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation and norms⁴³⁰ However, considering Thailand's two successful coups in 2006 and 2014, the absence of democratic elections from 2014 to 2019, and seemingly arbitrary and strict use of lese

⁴²⁸ White House, "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha of Thailand Before Bilateral Meeting."

⁴²⁹ Jim Garamone, "U.S., Thai Leaders Reaffirm Military-to-Military Relationship," *DOD News*, February 7, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1434348/us-thai-leaders-reaffirm-military-to-military-relationship/>.

⁴³⁰ Garamone, "U.S., Thai Leaders Reaffirm Military-to-Military Relationship."

majesty laws, it should stand to reason that Thailand-U.S. relations were anything but strong.⁴³¹ Not to mention that, at the time of Dunford's speech, Thailand had yet to hold new elections. It is likely, then, that Dunford's overtures stemmed from Prayut and Trump's 2017 diplomatic meeting, which signaled the normalization of Thailand-U.S. relations without direct mention of democracy. Dunford's remarks were similar to statements made after Thailand returned to democratic governance following the 2006 coup, yet came without renewed elections being realized. His comments reflect the Trump administration's willingness to engage with Thailand on multiple levels.

The Trump Administration made additional attempts to revitalize Thailand-U.S. diplomacy a year later. On August 1, 2019, five months after Thailand held its first election since the 2014 coup, and just two months after the election results saw Prayut retain his premiership, U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo arrived in Bangkok and made statements that echoed Dunford's speech.⁴³² During his visit with Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai, Pompeo described a thriving Thailand-U.S. military relationship and announced an agreement with Don to maintain strong security ties.⁴³³ Notably, Pompeo, the top U.S. diplomat, expanded on matters of foreign affairs and urged Don to dispute Chinese coercion in the South China Sea. While Don did not respond to the point made about China, he noted that "the ties of friendship between our two countries has been time-tested. The issues we discussed, which I'll mention very briefly, have been very healthy, making good progress in just all areas: people-to-people connectivity, education, government-to-government."⁴³⁴ Highlighting further the improvement in diplomatic ties, Don sang praises about enhancing bilateral relations under Pompeo's stewardship and expressed joy and pride at hosting Pompeo during the visit. This timely remark arrived at

⁴³¹ H.R., Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act.

⁴³² "Statement by Secretary Pompeo on the New Government of the Kingdom of Thailand," U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand, July 17, 2019, <https://th.usembassy.gov/statement-by-secretary-pompeo-on-the-new-government-of-the-kingdom-of-thailand/>.

⁴³³ Michael P. Pompeo, "Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai at a Press Availability," U.S. Department of State, August 1, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-michael-r-pompeo-and-thai-foreign-minister-don-pramudwinai-at-a-press-availability/>.

⁴³⁴ Pompeo, "Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo and Thai Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai at a Press Availability."

the precipice of major headlines reporting a distancing of Thailand-U.S. relations and strengthening of Thai-Sino strategic cooperation.⁴³⁵ Dunford's, Pompeo's, and Don's remarks, then, showcase that a return to positive Thailand-U.S. diplomatic exchanges is possible upon symbolic meetings between state leaders and completion of democratic elections.

3. Conclusion: Thailand-U.S. Diplomatic Relations under the Prayut Years

Diplomatic ties between Thailand and the United States under the Prayut Administration declined and stagnated at a low impasse in the first three years, starting with state officials from both sides criticizing one another publicly before making progress in 2017. Domestic politics within Thailand and the United States also contributed to the 2014–17 decline in Thailand-U.S. diplomacy, despite initial efforts by Washington to mend the relationship as seen in the 2016 ASEAN-US Summit invitation. Yet, by October 2017, Thailand-U.S. diplomacy was on the mend with Prayut's visit with Trump marking a normalization of diplomatic relations. Finally, to the extent that Prayut cultivated a stronger diplomatic relationship with other state leaders, namely China's leaders, his decisions were strategically crafted. Prayut does not appear to have courted strong Sino-Thai diplomacy with the intent of fully abandoning Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties.⁴³⁶ Rather, he has engaged more with China to help legitimize his self-appointed rule over Thailand as prime minister, since a leader's legitimacy can be shored up by both another sovereign state's acknowledgment and through performance, such as delivering stability and economic growth.⁴³⁷ Moreover, U.S. sanctions limited what Thailand could obtain militarily and, Prayut reasonably needed to obtain resources from other major international partners. His

⁴³⁵ Benjamin Zawacki, "America's Biggest Southeast Asian Ally is Drifting Toward China," *Foreign Policy*, September 29, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/29/its-on-trump-to-stop-bangkoks-drift-to-beijing/>; Charlie Campbell, "Thailand PM Prayuth Chan-ocha on Turning to China Over the U.S.," *Times*, June 21, 2018, <https://time.com/5318224/exclusive-prime-minister-prayuth-chan-ocha-thailand-interview/>; Richard S. Ehrlich, "Great Powers Jostle to Buy, Sell, and Woo Thailand," *Asia Times*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/08/article/great-powers-jostle-to-buy-sell-and-woo-thailand/>.

⁴³⁶ Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," 128.

⁴³⁷ Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1991): 233–56: doi:10.2307/2010472.

2017 visit with Trump finally opened the door for further diplomatic visits, such as those by Dunford and Pompeo, to Thailand. It can be argued, then, that contemporary Thailand-U.S. diplomacy, while not as strong as before the 2006 coup, is again progressing forward.

D. CONCLUSION

Thailand-U.S. diplomacy receded after the 2006 coup compared to where it was at the end of the Thaksin era, but has since stabilized under the Trump Administration's comfort with authoritarianism and Thailand's return to elections in 2019. Specifically, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations were initially speculated to decline in the first few months under the Thaksin Administration (2001–2006). It took Thaksin's eventual support of the U.S. global war on terrorism to set Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations on a path of greater enhancement and cooperation, ultimately elevating the two allies' diplomacy to a robust and strengthened one. The 2006 coup brought a rapid series of five prime ministers, each without a coherent foreign policy, to lead Thailand from 2006 to 2014. This confounded Thailand-U.S. diplomatic ties. Despite Obama's effort to strengthen Thailand-U.S. relations with his 2012 visit and the signing of the 2012 Joint Vision Statement with Yingluck, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations remained stagnated at a low level.

After the 2014 coup, diplomacy between Thailand and the United States was again rocky, with Washington criticizing the coup, Prayut criticizing U.S. interference, and Prayut strengthening ties with China in an effort to legitimize his rule of Thailand and obtain resources.⁴³⁸ Domestic political problems in Thailand and the United States further curtailed diplomatic relations from 2014 to 2017, despite guarded efforts by both side to make amends. Here, Prayut's indecisiveness at whether to commit to the TPP when proposed by Obama during his term, and Trump's decision to later withdraw from the TPP, caused a momentary window of opportunity to restore ties. Still, by October 2017, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations were on the mend with Trump's invitation for Prayut to meet at the White House, signaling the normalization of diplomatic ties. While no guarantees were made to conduct continuing, consistent official meetings, this 2017 visit

⁴³⁸ "Secretary of State John Kerry's Statement on the Coup in Thailand," U.S. Embassy in the Philippines, May 22, 2014, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/secretary-state-john-kerrys-statement-coup-thailand/>.

marked the return of Thailand-U.S. high-level diplomatic visit between state leaders and postured the two countries for greater diplomatic engagements.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to assess and explain the evolution in Thailand-U.S. relations since the 2006 coup and found that Thailand-U.S. relations have declined from their strong robustness prior to the coup but not as significantly as is commonly purported and not equally across all sectors. Adherence to U.S. laws, frequent leadership changes in Thailand, and hedging best explain these shifts. This thesis reached this conclusion by examining military, economic, and diplomatic activity over three periods. First, it described the state of Thailand-U.S. relations prior to the 2006 coup under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government (2001–06) to establish a baseline understanding of the bilateral ties. Second, it identified trends and analyzed a set of influential factors to explain the reasons for changes to Thailand-U.S. relations between the 2006 and 2014 coups. Third, it traced activities and analyzed similar contributing factors to explain the reasons for the relationship's decline and restoration since the 2014 coup. These influential factors included Thailand's relationship with China in this era of great power competition, the ramifications of U.S. reactions to the 2006 and 2014 coups in Thailand, and the impact of Thai foreign policies and Thai political actors who adopted them.

In reaching these findings, this thesis makes a timely contribution to understanding the current state of Thailand-U.S. affairs and likely scenarios going forward. Thailand is distinguished as the United States' oldest treaty ally in Asia, as well as continuing to be a key security ally whose domestic stability and growth are important to maintaining regional peace.⁴³⁹ It would, therefore, be exceptionally alarming, particularly in this era of great power competition, should the Kingdom distance itself from the United States and pivot strongly toward a regional, rising great power and U.S. adversary, namely China. Most poignantly, the ramifications of the 2006 and 2014 Thai coups and U.S. responses to each coup, as well as the foreign policies and actions of Thai state leaders, challenged the stability and strength of the Thailand-U.S. alliance. Dissecting the extent to which the

⁴³⁹ "U.S. Relations with Thailand," U.S. Department of State, October 21, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-thailand/>.

Thailand-U.S. alliance was negatively affected as a result of the coups, then, was necessary to better understand the nature of Thailand-U.S. relations and advise policymakers on how best to manage this critical relationship.

A. THE IMPACT OF THE 2006 AND 2014 COUPS

Through an aggregate analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, this thesis found that since the 2006 coup, Thailand-U.S. relations overall have declined. Namely, they are not as robust and strong compared to the state of the relationship during former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's tenure (2001–06). In each of the three analyzed sectors of the Thailand-U.S. alliance, Thailand-U.S. military and economic ties have strengthened in certain areas while declined in others. Diplomatic ties correspondingly have rebounded to a present state of normalization from periods of alternately low stagnation and decline between the 2006 coup and 2017.

1. Baseline Period: The Thaksin Administrative Years (2001–06)

Overall Thailand-U.S. relations under the Thaksin Administration (2001–06) had deepened by the end of Thaksin's tenure, despite Thaksin's rhetoric about the Kingdom pivoting to Asia. Thailand-U.S. military relations improved dramatically with increases in U.S. financing for military equipment and the International Military and Education Training (IMET) programs and sales in military equipment to Thailand. COBRA GOLD evolved to become a multinational and multiservice military exercise with training scenarios responsive to emerging threat environments. While the number of U.S. participants in COBRA GOLD fluctuated widely each year, those fluctuations are most attributable to U.S. war campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq and are not suggestive of a decline in Thailand-U.S. military ties.

Thailand-U.S. economic and diplomatic ties also strengthened considerably by the end of Thaksin's time in office. Economic relations in that period may seem mixed due to fluctuations in U.S. development assistance to Thailand, which trended downward because of Thaksin's extrajudicial war-on-drugs campaign that violated human rights. But, on balance, Thailand-U.S. economic relations were strong and stable given the sustained increases in total trade and FDI. As for Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations, while foreign

assistance was arguably curtailed due to Thaksin's war on drugs campaign, the Bush Administration was largely muted about the campaign—expressing only conventional disapproval of human rights violation with no overt criticism and condemnation. The Bush Administration was indebted to Thaksin's support of the U.S. war on terrorism campaign. On balance, then, diplomatic ties were vigorous and healthy with official working visits between the two state leaders conducted on a reciprocal, frequent basis. Therefore, the positive state of Thailand-U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic ties represent a growing, strong alliance. Had there been no coup in 2006, it is arguable that the Thailand-U.S. alliance would have continued on its positive, upward trajectory.

2. After the 2006 Coup (2007–14)

Thailand-U.S. relations after the 2006 coup (2007–14), on the whole, were mixed with initial periods of decline that stabilized at a low impasse by the time of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government (2011–14) and remained somewhat stable until her ousting via coup on May 22, 2014. Compared to the Thaksin Administration period, however, Thailand-U.S. relations exhibited an overall decline. An analysis of military ties revealed two distinct trends where, positively, the nature of COBRA GOLD expanded and U.S. foreign military sales (FMS) with Thailand increased, but, negatively, U.S. funding to foreign military financing (FMF) and IMET were suspended because of the coup. FMF and IMET funding was restored once Thailand became a democracy again upon holding elections in 2007. Overall, the differences within sectors of Thailand-U.S. military relations indicate some fluctuations but, on balance, were stable.

Analysis of Thailand-U.S. economic ties also paints a mixed picture with Thailand-U.S. diplomacy negatively affected most by the coup. Despite political instability and frequent regime and leadership changes in the first five years after the coup, Thailand-U.S. bilateral trade increased to its second-highest point to date at \$39 billion in 2014, as did U.S. FDI to Thailand at \$40 billion in 2012. FDI fluctuated more turbulently than bilateral trade, but both showed similar upward trends, whereas U.S. development assistance through USAID and USTDA was initially curtailed by the coup, with some funding to

Thailand suspended altogether. On balance, Thailand-U.S. economic ties were somewhat affected by the coup but grew overall.

The same cannot be said for Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations, which were substantially impacted by the coup and continued instability. Compared to the frequent and robust diplomatic visits during the Thaksin years, Thailand-U.S. state leaders held just two meetings from 2007 to 2014, and both were from a U.S. President to Thailand: Bush in 2008 and Obama in 2012. Bush's visit came after the Thai junta transferred control of the government to a civilian leader via elections in 2007, and Obama's visit came after Yingluck had been elected to office in 2011, replacing Abhisit who had been appointed. But, Obama's objective was to strengthen the alliance in accordance with U.S. "Pivot to Asia" foreign policy initiatives, not for the sake of the alliance, per se. Neither visit resulted in follow-up meetings focused at restoring the Thailand-U.S. alliance.

Thus, Thailand-U.S. relations were overall impacted by the 2006 coup to some extent in each of the three sectors and slightly declined from the strong baseline established during the Thaksin years, despite some strengthening in engagements through COBRA GOLD, trade, and foreign investments. Had the 2014 coup not occur, it is likely that greater efforts would have been made to further restore the alliance, given that Thailand had the same democratically elected leader from 2011–14.

3. After the 2014 Coup (2014–19)

Thailand-U.S. relations after the 2014 coup declined from both the baseline period (2001–06) and post-2006 coup period (2007–14). This sustained decline, felt most intensely in the military and diplomatic sectors, was due to incumbent Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, the 2014 coup leader, retaining his premiership and placing Thailand under authoritarian control for five years. However, after the Prayut-Trump diplomatic meeting in October 2017, some aspects of Thailand-U.S. relations have normalized while greater effort has been made to enhance the alliance. Thus, on balance, Thailand-U.S. relations after the 2014 coup initially declined overall but have since stabilized with some restoration after this 2017 official high-level visit.

Thailand-U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic ties within the alliance context were mixed, with some sectors and subsector indicators increasing, some stabilizing, and others declining from 2014 to 2019 relative to 2001–14. Militarily, COBRA GOLD U.S. participation levels plummeted while Thailand participation numbers remained stable. This was the first period in nearly two decades where the number of U.S. forces were generally on par with each other. Qualitatively, however, the exercise enjoyed greater complexity and interoperability, partly promulgated by U.S. efforts at countering China’s rise in the Indo-Pacific region. U.S. financing for military equipment and funding to IMET were significantly affected by the coup with funding outright suspended after 2014. But, FMS were positive with a slightly upward trend as Thailand continued purchasing foreign military equipment from the United States.

Economically, overall Thailand-U.S. relations improved throughout the Prayut years with some periods of stability but trending upward, nonetheless. Bilateral trade continued its steady upward trajectory. Having more than doubled between 2013 and 2014, FDI has held relatively stable at this enhanced level since 2014 with the exception of a one-year temporary dip in 2017. U.S. development assistance, in contrast, declined significantly from previous years.

Finally, Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations were most affected by the 2014 coup with Prayut’s visit with Trump in 2017 marking the only meeting between the two countries’ top leaders since the 2014 coup. Nevertheless, the meeting produced positive dialogue with both leaders expressing their intent to increase Thailand-U.S. relations. Therefore, while Thailand-U.S. relations, on balance, have substantially declined after the 2014 coup, the 2017 meeting repositioned the contemporary alliance on an upward trajectory by normalizing the ties.

B. TESTING HYPOTHESES

This thesis submitted three potential factors that may have influenced the evolution of Thailand-U.S. relations since the 2006 coup: Thailand bandwagoning in the current era of great power competition, the ramifications of U.S. reactions to the 2006 and 2014 coups, and Thai foreign policies and the Thai political actors who adopt them. Three hypotheses

grew out of these three factors and current international relations theory: bandwagoning, U.S. foreign policies, and Thai domestic politics, including ambiguous Thai foreign policies.

The bandwagoning hypothesis proposed that Thailand is bandwagoning with a rising China in the hopes of sharing conquered spoils. This hypothesis was disproven, given that Thailand did not align with China against the United States. Rather, Thailand is hedging between the two countries to reap profits from relations with both. The second hypothesis posited that the United States' relatively harsh condemnations of Thailand and its imposed sanctions following the 2006 and 2014 coups would not lead to a decline in Thailand-U.S. relations because the security alliance and historically strong ties would foster stability. This, too, was proven false, since U.S. criticism and sanctions did lead to overall declines in Thailand-U.S. relations after the 2006 and 2014 coups, most notably in the military and diplomatic realms. The final hypothesis postulated that Thai domestic politics would shift toward more ambiguous Thai foreign policies since the 2006 coup may have contributed to a decline in Thailand-U.S. relations. This is also proven false.

1. Hypothesis 1: Bandwagoning

The first hypothesis, that Thailand is bandwagoning with a rising China in the hope of sharing conquered spoils, was disproven. This hypothesis is based on a consideration of China as a revisionist state and Thailand's desire to advance its strategic capabilities and grow and diversify its economy further after becoming an upper-middle-income economy in 2011 through greater engagements with a rapidly growing China economy.⁴⁴⁰

Three criteria would need to be met to suggest Thailand was bandwagoning with its large northern neighbor. First, Thailand would be bandwagoning with China against the United States if Thailand-U.S. relations declined—as measured across the security, economic, and diplomatic realms—while Sino-Thai relations improved. Second, Thailand would not be bandwagoning with China if Thailand-U.S. and Sino-Thai relations remained near constant or improved in-tandem. Instead, with these outcomes, Thailand would be

⁴⁴⁰ World Bank, "Thailand Now an Upper Middle Income Economy."

hedging to better Thailand's gains by pursuing constructive relations with two states that are at odds with each other.⁴⁴¹ Lastly, Thailand would not be bandwagoning with China if Thailand-U.S. relations improved while Thai-Sino relations declined.

Based on the aforementioned criteria, Thailand, again, is not bandwagoning with China. Although Thailand now has a greater total trade balance with China, engages in frequent diplomatic visits with Chinese state leaders, and enters into memorandums of understanding, these are not necessarily indicators of Thailand bandwagoning with China against the United States. Thailand trades with China because it has the region's largest and fastest growing economy and Thailand wants to share in the gains. Furthermore, Thai state leaders, such as Prayut, engaged with their Chinese counterparts to cultivate domestic political legitimacy after their American ally enacted sanctions that inhibited greater Thailand-U.S. engagement. Finally, while Thailand is pursuing greater Sino-Thai military ties, this pursuit, too, is likely a result of Thailand needing to find a partner to help modernize and grow its armed forces due to U.S. sanctions following the coups.⁴⁴²

2. Hypothesis 2: U.S. Foreign Policy and Thailand's Reaction

Like the first, the second hypothesis was also proven false. It posited that the United States' relatively harsh condemnations of Thailand and the U.S. imposed sanctions following the 2006 and 2014 coups, and Thai domestic politics (namely, the political leaders' actions), would not lead to a decline in Thailand-U.S. relations since the 2006 coup. The reasoning was that Thailand-U.S. military and economic relations and engagements would continue largely unabated, regardless of U.S. sanctions, due to longstanding Thailand-U.S. ties built on a formidable strategic cooperation evident in a robust Thailand-U.S. partnership during the Cold War and Thailand's support of U.S. military campaigns in the global war on terrorism. While strategic cooperation showed

⁴⁴¹ Jackson, "Power, Trust, and Network Complexity: Three Logics of Hedging in Asian Security," 333-40.

⁴⁴² Ian Storey, "China and Thailand: Enhancing Military-Security Ties in the 21st Century," *China Brief* 8, no. 14 (2008): <https://jamestown.org/program/china-and-thailand-enhancing-military-security-ties-in-the-21st-century/>.

continuity and was relied upon by both sides, Thailand-U.S. relations did, on the whole, decline because of U.S. sanctions following the coup.

Four outcomes would reflect the extent to which the second hypothesis stands: First, Thailand-U.S. relations would not decline, especially in security cooperation as measured in the COBRA GOLD exercise, FMS, FMF, EDA, and IMET programs. Second, Thailand-U.S. relations would continue largely unabated, despite punitive U.S. foreign policies and denunciations. Third, Thailand-U.S. relations would not weaken if, regardless of the Thai political leaders' bashings of U.S. policies, Thailand-U.S. security cooperation continued. Lastly, the contrary stands: that Thailand-U.S. relations would decline if Thai political leaders seek to constructively engage U.S. competitors—specifically, China—and there is an increase in the latter's security cooperation with Thailand.

Given these four criteria, Thailand-U.S. relations have indeed declined. The U.S. response to the 2006 coup brought minimal impact to COBRA GOLD and only briefly affected funding to the FMS, FMF, EDA, and IMET programs. After the 2014 coup, COBRA GOLD numbers of U.S. participants dropped significantly but the sophistication of exercises grew and FMS remained largely unaffected. Yet, since the 2014 coup, funding to FMF and IMET are still gravely affected. Since 2014, the United States has suspended \$3.5 million in FMF and \$85,000 in IMET funding to Thailand.⁴⁴³ Thai state leaders—specifically, Prayut—have rejected U.S. criticism of the coup. For instance, Prayut was unabashed in rebuking the United States' condemnation, criticizing U.S.-imposed trade sanctions on Thailand and the downsized U.S. participation in the joint-military Cobra Gold exercise.⁴⁴⁴ While COBRA GOLD and FMS did not end despite Prayut's harsh retribution, Thailand-U.S. military relations were still, on balance, negatively affected by the 2014 coup.

Finally, a point of clarification must be made about the last criteria that judges Thailand-U.S. relations as having declined if Thai political leaders sought to constructively

⁴⁴³ Chanlett-Avery et al., *Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report No. IF10253.

⁴⁴⁴ Busbarat, "Thai-US Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: Untying the Special Relationship," 268-69.

engage China and there was an increase in Sino-Thai security cooperation. Again, Thai state leaders felt it necessary to engage China to gain domestic political legitimacy as afforded through diplomatic visits with other states' leaders. For Prayut, then, it was important that throughout the Kingdom's earlier periods of political unrest and this recent period of authoritarianism, China did not criticize Thailand's junta.⁴⁴⁵ It would be misleading to claim that Sino-Thai security cooperation is increasing *with the aim* to surpass and supplant Thailand-U.S. security ties. Indeed, Thailand benefits from hedging between China and the United States.

3. Hypothesis 3: Thai Domestic Politics and Ambiguous Thai Foreign Policies

The third hypothesis postulated that a shift toward more ambiguous Thai foreign policies—that is, hedging—since the 2006 coup may have contributed to a decline in Thailand-U.S. relations, which is partly incorrect. This ambiguity reflects Thai policymakers' willingness to court both a democratic United States and an authoritarian China, despite Thailand being a U.S. treaty ally. The hypothesis also submitted that Thai political leaders' negative perceptions toward the United States interfering in Thai politics has also led to a decline in Thailand-U.S. relations. This hypothesis would hold true if Thailand-U.S. relations suffered in the wake of the coups and after Thai state leaders cultivated stronger Sino-Thai security, economic, and diplomatic relations. It would be disproven should Thailand-U.S. relations remained constant or improve while Sino-Thai relations remained the same.

Overall, Thailand-U.S. relations have indeed declined from their strong baseline point during the Thaksin Administrative years. However, it is necessary to clarify that while Thailand-U.S. relations have declined, the retreat is not a result of Thailand's hedging policies. Indeed, the United States and Thailand have generally sought to maintain their security ties as much as U.S. law will allow. Thai state leaders have courted China to engage in the Thailand-U.S. led COBRA GOLD military exercise, highlighting again Thai leaders' hedging policies aimed at increasing gains through engagements with both great

⁴⁴⁵ Hewison, "Thailand: An Old Relationship Renewed," 120.

powers. This is reflected in, for instance, the former COBRA GOLD Deputy Director and Thai Major General Wittaya Wachirakul's peculiar statement about China's first-ever role as a participant in COBRA GOLD 2014's HA/DR exercise.⁴⁴⁶ When asked about the decision to include China as a participant, Wittaya disclosed that Beijing and Bangkok held talks in 2013 about the possibility of the former becoming a participant, which Wittaya stated "would be a good way to reduce tension...in the region."⁴⁴⁷ His words created alarm in the U.S. government when coupled with China's full participatory status in COBRA GOLD 2015 and reports of Thailand and China strengthening military ties.⁴⁴⁸ Still, the strengthening in Sino-Thai military ties were not intended to depreciate Thailand-U.S. military ties as the latter engagement grew more sophisticated through COBRA GOLD and FMS.

Similarly, since the 2006 coup, Sino-Thai economic relations have grown as Thai leaders engaged more with China, as well as Beijing officials offering more assistance to Thailand. But this, too, is reflective of Thai state leaders needing to trade with China, the region's growing economic powerhouse. In December 2011, for example, Bangkok and Beijing agreed for the Bank of Thailand and the People's Bank of China to conduct a three-year currency swap worth 70 billion renminbi (\$10 billion).⁴⁴⁹ In October 2013, incumbent Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Thailand concluded with him and Yingluck praising their economic partnership and expressing a desire to achieve a bilateral trade goal of \$100 billion in 2015, which would continue to be guided by their Five-Year Development Plan on Trade and Economic Cooperation.⁴⁵⁰

Yet, increased Sino-Thai economic ties were not intended to curtail Thailand-U.S. economic relations, as Thailand's hedging policies included engaging both countries. By

⁴⁴⁶ Yee, "China Makes Modest Debut at Cobra Gold – But Still No Confirmation if it Will Be Full Participant."

⁴⁴⁷ Yee, "China Makes Modest Debut at Cobra Gold – But Still No Confirmation if it Will Be Full Participant."

⁴⁴⁸ Nanuam and Jikkham, "Thailand, China Bolster Military Ties as U.S. Relations Splinter."

⁴⁴⁹ Zawacki, *Thailand: Shifting Ground between the U.S. and a Rising China*.

⁴⁵⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand, "Joint Press Statement on Long-Term Program on the Development of Thailand – China Relations."

2018, during the Prayut period, Sino-Thai trade relations improved to where China is now Thailand's largest import-export partner at \$79 billion total trade, compared to the United States at \$43.3 billion in total trade.⁴⁵¹ Still, the value of Thailand-U.S. trade more than doubled between 2001–18 through a generally steady increase each year. Even more impressive, FDI from the United States into Thailand between 2001–18 tripled in value.

Finally, while Thailand-U.S. diplomatic relations waxed and waned since the 2006 coup before approaching normalization with the 2017 Prayut-Trump meeting, Thai state leaders continually courted greater diplomatic engagements with their Chinese counterparts prior to and after the 2006 coup. But again, such cultivation of Sino-Thai diplomatic relations was necessary from Thai state leaders' perspectives since their American ally had publically criticized their flailing democracy, thereby questioning the legitimacy of Thai prime ministers.

C. THESIS CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis furthers the literature on theories of international relations as well as regional and security studies in Southeast Asia. Much of the current literature on Southeast Asian countries debates whether the countries primarily adopt a realist, liberalist, or constructivist approach toward foreign affairs with the predominant choices being bandwagoning, balancing, and hedging. This thesis demonstrated that Thailand, like many of its Southeast Asian counterparts, chooses to hedge between the United States and China, rather than outright balance with its U.S. ally against a rising China or bandwagon with its Chinese neighbor against its American ally. As such, this thesis supports others who argue Thailand's hedging policies may result in more ambiguous interpretations of Thai state leaders' actions, if only interpreted from the predominant realist perspective.

⁴⁵¹ Observatory of Economic Complexity (Thailand; accessed June 17, 2019); Export, "Thailand – Market Overview."

D. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. FOREIGN POLICIES AND PRACTITIONERS

This thesis demonstrated that Thailand-U.S. relations since the 2006 coup have, in aggregate, declined relative to their baseline period (2001–06), with the exception of continuity in FMS, the survival of COBRA GOLD, and significant growth in trade and FDI. Notwithstanding the 2017 Trump-Prayut visit returning Thailand-U.S. relations to a relatively normalized and cordial level with some projections of future engagements being positive, it is premature to argue that Thailand-U.S. relations will continue its return to an optimistic, upward trajectory. History has shown the Kingdom’s preference to hedge, and this should caution U.S. policymakers when speculating how its ally may behave in this era of great power competition against China. Thailand’s military, which despite elections in March 2019, continues to enjoy significant power, and political unrest is likely to continue. The Thai military would be unwise to perceive a single meeting with an unpopular U.S. president as a “green light” to continue its prominent role in politics. The coups should still serve as a reminder and lesson to America of how best to deal with its strategically savvy ally.

Nevertheless, Thailand has historically proven to be an invaluable player in U.S. strategic goals and military campaigns. The United States must, therefore, not forget that historic ties are only in its favor and that it should continue advocating for its oldest friend in Asia to uphold democratic values while being mindful of the Kingdom’s political history. Finally, considering both Thailand’s title as one of the founding ASEAN member nations and the influence the country can exert within the Southeast Asian region, it would benefit Washington to cultivate closer diplomatic relations with Bangkok lest risk the Kingdom falling further under the shadows and sway of China.

E. CONCLUSION

In sum, this thesis found that Thailand-U.S. relations overall have declined since the 2006 and 2014 coups but are still highly valued by both countries and are actually stronger in some areas, such as the sophistication, albeit not troop numbers, of COBRA GOLD, FMS, trade, and FDI. As such, generalized summaries do not do this complex

relationship justice. This conclusion was reached through an aggregate analysis of quantitative and qualitative data spanning 2001–2019, with the 2001–05 Thaksin Administration period serving as a baseline for comparison. It also considered how Sino-Thai military, economic, and diplomatic relations have evolved in the context of Thailand-U.S. relations, concluding that Thailand has been hedging in all three sectors between these two large powers—one a long-term ally, the other a recent foe but now a rising power—in reaction to U.S. sanctions and criticism following Thailand’s two 21st century coups d’etat.

To expand on these findings, this thesis recommends that future research include an in-depth analysis and examination of Sino-Thai relations compared to Thailand-U.S. relations. Other research might also dive deep into an explanation of Sino-Thai relations across economic, military, and diplomatic sectors. Should future research seek to focus strictly on Thailand-U.S. relations, this researcher recommends further explanatory analysis of why such trends occur within Thailand-U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic relations. Ultimately, a clear, data-driven, and nuanced understanding of Thailand-U.S. relations remains necessary, especially in an era of great power competition, because, if the United States should allow this historic alliance to suffer, Washington would lose significant strategic access in the Indo-Pacific.

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